

France not taking ‘underrated’ Denmark lightly

REUTERS

Having lost twice to Denmark recently, France will be taking nothing for granted when they look to secure their qualification for the knockout stages with a game to spare in Group D on Saturday.

The defending champions entered the tournament on the back of a dismal Nations League campaign, during which Denmark beat them 2-1 in Paris and 2-0 in Copenhagen.

“I’ve said on a number of occasions that they are underrated as a team. We’re talking about just a four-month period, we’re not talking about a long period, it’s between June and September where they beat us twice,” France captain and keeper Hugo Lloris told a news conference on Friday.

Even if the World Cup is another tournament altogether, Les Bleus have a fair idea of the problems Denmark, who back in 2002 struck the final blow in France’s terrible campaign with a 2-0 group-stage win, can cause them.

France started the Qatar tournament in style with a 4-1 win against Australia, but Denmark will be a sterner test at the 974 Stadium.

“It’s a different competition, but it gives you an idea of the level of this Danish team, it’s an excellent side and they are capable of beating the best. So it’s been a wake-up call for us and we can’t say that we don’t know them, and we don’t need any extra motivation at this stage of the tournament,” said Lloris.

Meanwhile, Denmark coach Kasper Hjulmand said his team must find another gear against France today.



FRANCE VS DENMARK		
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH	
Matches 16	Aurelien Tchouameni (France)	Andreas Christensen (Denmark)
France 8	Caps 15	Caps 59
Denmark 6	Goals 1	Goals 2
Draw 2		

The Danes were held to a goalless draw by Tunisia in their first game.

“Tomorrow’s [Saturday] game is obviously an important one for us after the start we had. It’s an opponent who belongs at the very, very top of football. The quality and talent they have in France at the moment is spectacular,” Hjulmand told reporters on Friday.

“The way they played (against Australia) was also a bit different than the two games [in the Nations League] we played against them. I have great respect for France, but I also know how strong we are. We’ve tested them a few times.

“Obviously this is a new tournament, a bigger tournament. But we know that if we play our very best, we have a chance of getting a good result, and that’s what we’re aiming for. To be able to do that, we have to take a big step forward in the quality from the first match.”

Meanwhile, France welcome back centre back Raphael Varane, who has fully recovered from a hamstring injury and could bring his calm manner and experience to bear in the back four.

ARGENTINA VS MEXICO	
HEAD-TO-HEAD	
Matches 35	
Argentina 16	
Mexico 14	
Draw 5	
PLAYERS TO WATCH	
LIONEL MESSI (ARGENTINA)	
Caps 166	
Goals 92	
HIRVING LOZANO (MEXICO)	
Caps 61	
Goals 16	



Lionel Messi is accustomed to having all hopes pinned on him as the Argentina skipper faces the stern challenge of averting an early exit for the Albiceleste from the World Cup. Messi was heavily tipped to go all the way in Qatar in his fifth and last World Cup, but now Argentina need to beat Mexico in their Group C clash at the Lusail Stadium on Saturday to stay alive.

PHOTO: TWITTER

‘Win or win’ situation for Messi and Co

AGENCIES

Argentina hope to restore their status as a tournament favourite against goal-shy Mexico in their Group C clash on Saturday where both heavyweights of Latin American football need to improve on disappointing starts to the World Cup.

The Argentines suffered one of the biggest shocks in World Cup history, with a 2-1 reverse to low-ranked Saudi Arabia, as captain and top scorer Lionel Messi embarked on his fifth and final attempt to win the only prize that has eluded him. The Argentine skipper could well say his dreams of holding the World Cup aloft goodbye today if they fail to beat Mexico.

It would be a steep task for Messi’s Argentina as Mexico’s low-scoring and injury-hit squad bore out pre-tournament pessimism in their first game, drawing 0-0 against Poland and only avoiding defeat thanks to a stunning save from veteran goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa.

So an already spicy-looking encounter has become even hotter for both teams if they are to avoid the ignominy of early exit.

“We have to win or win,” Messi said. “It’s up to us to correct mistakes and get back to the basics of who we are.”

Those basics took Argentina on an extraordinary, three-year unbeaten run of 36 games until defeat by the Saudis, which they hope was an aberration rather than a sign of decline at just the wrong moment.

The Argentines will be particularly focussing on how to spring high defensive lines after the frustration of seeing three goals ruled out for offside against the Saudis.

The ease with which the Saudis unsettled their defence in a manic start to the second half, when they scored twice, is another source of concern for Argentina.

Widely tipped among the favourites to go all the way in Qatar, Argentina now find themselves at risk of a premature exit and need a response, with Aston Villa keeper Emiliano Martinez rallying the troops.

“We expected to play like it was a final, but we didn’t do that. After we scored the first goal we relaxed a bit and we paid for that. Saturday will be our first World Cup final,” Martinez said.

For today’s game, Mexico’s challenge is straightforward: how to score. In winger Hirving Lozano, they have someone guaranteed to supply crosses but no one is finishing the chances. “We need more accuracy,” said coach Gerardo Martino, himself an Argentine.

Argentina are pursuing a third World Cup title with particular passion given that Messi has said this is his last tournament, meaning it his final opportunity to match the late, great Diego Maradona’s immortality at home. Mexico are nothing if not consistent at recent World Cups - they have been eliminated in the last 16 at each since 1994.



Australia face stubborn Tunisia in must-win clash

REUTERS, Al Wakrah

Australia’s World Cup clash against Tunisia at Al Janoub Stadium on Saturday pitches a Socceroos side that have struggled to score against a team that have this year made a virtue of not conceding.

The Australians would have long targeted the clash with the North Africans as their best chance of a victory in Group D to break a finals winless streak that goes back to South Africa in 2010.

The fixture became all the more important for

TUNISIA VS AUSTRALIA		
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH	
Matches 2	Youssef Msakni (Tunisia)	Matthew Leckie (Australia)
Australia 1	Caps 84	Caps 74
Tunisia 1	Goals 17	Goals 13



Spirited Saudis aim to defy odds again

AGENCIES

Contrasting moods will accompany Poland and Saudi Arabia into their World Cup Group C clash on Saturday, with all the pressure on the Poles after they started with a disappointing goalless draw while the Saudis shocked Argentina.

Saudi Arabia stunned the world by beating the Argentines 2-1 on Tuesday and could upset the odds again against a Poland side who fluffed their lines versus Mexico when Robert Lewandowski, who has never scored at a World Cup, missed a penalty.

POLAND VS SAUDI ARABIA	
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH
Matches 4	Robert Lewandowski (Poland)
Poland 4	Caps 135, Goals 76
Saudi Arabia 0	
	Salem Al-Dawsari (Saudi Arabia)
	Caps 72, Goals 18

The Saudis, who are the second-lowest ranked team in the tournament only above Ghana, will eye their second-ever round of 16 after they were knocked out by Sweden back in 1994.

The odds were stacked against Saudi



Arabia in their first match against Argentina, as they will be again on matchday two as they tackle Poland.

Saudi Arabia had won only two of their previous 15 games at the finals – again in succession in 1994 – while this is the first time they have scored twice in consecutive matches.

They have never netted three in a World Cup match, though, and face a Poland team looking for a third clean sheet in a row – last achieving such a sequence between 1974 and 1978.

Saudi Arabia have lost nine of their 10 World Cup matches against European opposition, including each of the past eight in a row.

That dismal run included an 8-0 humiliation at the hands of Germany in 2002, but forward Saleh Al Shehri knows this is a very different team.



“That was a defeat in the past,” said Al Shehri, who netted the equaliser against Argentina. “I think we, as a country, want to get back and go up to the top as a team.

For Poland a win is vital to their hopes of reaching the last 16 for the first time since 1986.

“This result does not take away the chances of advancing further neither from us nor the Mexicans,” Poland coach Czeslaw Michniewicz said after Tuesday’s stalemate.

However, some of Poland players appear to have already given up on their last group match against Argentina, putting added pressure on the need to beat the Saudis.

“We’re adding zero points to our account ahead of the third match, which will definitely be lost,” goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny had said on the eve of

the Mexico game.

By contrast, the Saudis got a massive boost from their first ever opening World Cup victory and the surprise Group C leaders will approach the Poland game full of optimism.

“I think about the pressure,” added Al Shehri. “Every game has its own pressure.

“We did one job perfectly. It’s finished and we are waiting for the next game against Poland. The pressure is always on when you play at this top level.”

Both sides had similarly low possession and only two shots on target in their opening games but for Saudi Arabia that was enough to cause one of the biggest upsets in World Cup history.

Poland, who frustrated their fans and Lewandowski with a defensive approach, must be on the front foot or they could be heading out of the tournament.

Australia after they went down 4-1 to defending champions France in their tournament opener at the same stadium on Tuesday.

Tunisia’s 0-0 draw with Denmark earlier the same day, however, offered the Socceroos the glimpse of a path to the knockout stages for the second time in six World Cup campaigns.

“It was good that the other result was a draw and now it’s about winning on Saturday, so we have got to get ready for it,” said Australia coach Graham Arnold.

Breaching the Tunisian defence has proved beyond all but Brazil in the North African’s last 10 games, even if the five-times world champions did it five times in a September friendly in Paris.

Coach Jalel Kadri will be happy to accept accusations of negativity if he can find a way to get his country into the round of 16 for the first time in what is also their sixth appearance at the finals.

