

Saudis eye to emulate '94, while Mexicans seek more than win

REUTERS, AL RAYYAN

Argentina, Mexico and Poland may all have been fancied to progress from Group C at the World Cup ahead of Saudi Arabia, but after their stunning win over the Argentines, the Saudis are firmly in the mix ahead of their Wednesday game against Mexico.

In their five previous participations, Saudi Arabia have qualified for the round of 16 only once, on their debut at the tournament in 1994. Things will not be easy for Saudi Arabia, however, given that Mexico also have a chance of reaching the last 16, and for the eighth time in a row in their case.

In Qatar, Poland lead Group C on four points, one ahead of Argentina and Saudi Arabia, while Mexico are on one point. Thus, Mexico must win tonight but it will not guarantee

MEXICO VS SAUDI ARABIA	
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH
Matches 5	Alexis Vega (Mexico)
Mexico 4	Saleh Al-Shehri (Saudi Arabia)
Saudi Arabia 0	Caps 24
Draw 1	Goals 6
	Caps 22
	Goals 11



Robert Lewandowski (L) and Lionel Messi have achieved personal milestones in Qatar, with the Polish marksman scoring his maiden World Cup goal earlier while the Argentine talisman became the first player to give an assist in five World Cups. However, one of the two superstars could likely play their career's final World Cup match as Poland take on Argentina in a nerve-wracking encounter tonight. PHOTO: AFP



progress in case Argentina avoid defeat.

However, if Poland lose or draw with Argentina, Mexico – who are among the three sides to not have scored in first two rounds of group matches in Qatar – will be burdened with the task of scoring three goals against the Saudis to raise their goal difference on level terms with Argentina and Poland.

"As long as there are chances, we always need to try," Mexico's coach Tata Martino said. "Saudi Arabia need to win the match and score goals, and so do we."

Whereas, if Saudi Arabia want to progress they will have to beat Mexico, regardless of the outcome of the match between Poland and Argentina, while a draw would mean they need Poland to beat Argentina.

"No one around the world thought that we could play with this level. Yes, in Saudi Arabia we know the players well, but they are unknown to the fans around the world," Saudi coach Herve Renard told a news conference after his side's 2-0 loss against Poland.

Superstars Messi and Lewy face off for knockout berth

REUTERS, DOHA

Two of the most intimidating strikers in world football, Argentina's 35-year-old Lionel Messi and Poland's 34-year-old Robert Lewandowski, line up against each other on Wednesday with a last 16 place at stake in the World Cup.

Messi has scored twice in Argentina's extraordinary start to the campaign, suffering one of the biggest upsets in the tournament's history at the hands of Saudi Arabia before masterminding a euphoric victory over Mexico.

The brilliant Argentine, whose team are one of the tournament favourites, is playing his fifth and final campaign, meaning it is his last chance to match Diego Maradona and lift the trophy for his longing homeland.

"We had to give everyone peace of mind to be able to approach the Poland game in a different way," Messi said after the extraordinary pressure around the Mexico match.

ARGENTINA VS POLAND	
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH
Matches 11	Lionel Messi (Argentina)
Argentina 6	Robert Lewandowski (Poland)
Poland 3	Caps 167
Draw 2	Goals 93
	Caps 136
	Goals 77

With Argentina second in Group C on three points, one behind the Poles, they must win to be sure of progressing and keeping alive their dream of a third World Cup title.

A draw would be enough for the South Americans too if Mexico and Saudi Arabia also end level.

Like Messi, Lewandowski is also his nation's all-time top scorer and is on possibly his last mission at a World Cup. He has been in sizzling form for Messi's old club Barcelona and has also had an eventful start in Qatar.

Lewandowski uncharacteristically missed a penalty in Poland's opening draw with Mexico before scoring his first ever World Cup goal in their 2-0 win over Saudi Arabia.

That reduced him to tears. "The older I get, the more emotional I get, and I'm aware that it might be my last World Cup actually," said Lewandowski.

Poland, who have not reached the knockout stage since 1986, will go through with a win or draw against Argentina.

'All on the line' for Denmark and Australia

AGENCIES

Denmark coach Kasper Hjulmand admitted on Tuesday that "emotions are very, very high" for their must-win World Cup clash against a dogged Australia.

With holders France already qualified for the last 16 from Group D, Australia are in pole position to join them in the knockout rounds with three points from two games.

Hjulmand said "everyone is ready" and he has no fitness concerns, but he conceded the pressure is on for a team who had been expected prior to the tournament to progress along with France.

"It is a World Cup so emotions are very, very high and football is wonderful -- with football you can multiply your feelings by 10, the fear of losing is (also) very, very much involved."



AUSTRALIA VS DENMARK	
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH
Matches 4	Craig Goodwin (Australia)
Australia 1	Joakim Maehle (Denmark)
Denmark 2	Caps 12
Draw 1	Goals 2
	Caps 33
	Goals 9

Conserving form on France's agenda against desperate Tunisia

REUTERS, DOHA

France will look to keep their World Cup momentum going when they face Tunisia even though they have qualified for the knockout stages, and coach Didier Deschamps will likely make changes for the game on Wednesday.

The defending champions advanced to the last 16 after a 4-1 win against Australia and a 2-1 victory over Denmark. Only an improbable combination of results would prevent them from sealing top spot in Group D.

"The team who will play tomorrow will do everything to get the best possible result, even if I have this possibility to shuffle things around," Deschamps told a news conference on Tuesday.

The coach is expected to change at least half of the side who started against Denmark. The big question mark is whether Kylian Mbappe, who is chasing records in Qatar after scoring three goals and four in the 2018 World Cup, will be given a rest he might not want.

"Physically he is very well but you guys are saying I could have him play to preserve his ego," said Deschamps.

"Does he want to play? You guys don't know but I know. He doesn't have (that kind of) ego. He's part of a collective

"We're expecting a tough game. They're going to give everything and will be backed by a big number of fans who came to Qatar, but that's the kind of games we live for," Tchouameni

FRANCE VS TUNISIA	
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH
Matches 5	Kylian Mbappe (France)
France 2	Youssef Msakni (Tunisia)
Tunisia 1	Caps 61
Draw 2	Caps 89
	Goals 31
	Goals 17



project and of course he has this capacity to be in the limelight because he's decisive but he's not 18 anymore."

France, however, will not take things lightly at the Education Stadium.

"The momentum comes with results. The fact that we're already through like Brazil and Portugal gives us a bit of leeway but we are not going to be relaxed," said Deschamps.

Midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni is expecting a tough challenge from Tunisia, who must win to stand a chance of progressing in what Deschamps called an away match for France.

"We're expecting a tough game. They're going to give everything and will be backed by a big number of fans who came to Qatar, but that's the kind of games we live for," said Tchouameni, who is also likely to be rested alongside Adrien Rabiot, which means Deschamps could give Real Madrid midfielder Eduardo Camavinga a run.

"It's going to be an incredible test. It's all on the line for both teams," said Australia's defensive rock Harry Souttar, whose thunderous goal-saving tackle against Tunisia has been widely-praised.

Former Socceroo star Stan Lazaridis reckons the 2006 team getting Australia through to the knockout round for the first time was expected given the talent they had, but this side have surprised Aussie fans with their determination.

"If we do make that next round, it will probably be the biggest achievement, even ahead of the 2006 side, because they had a real quality about them," Lazaridis told Reuters at the Fanatics HQ in Al Wakrah, where many Australian fans are based.

Euro 2020 semi-finalists Denmark must beat Australia and hope Tunisia do not do likewise against France if they are to extend their stay in Qatar.

Hjulmand knows that the pressure is on, but he backs his players to handle it.

"Of course there is pressure," said the 50-year-old.

"(But) these players are very, very used to big games and the more experience you have of these kinds of events, from maybe feeling the pressure, you feel pride.

"It is a dream since you were a kid and now you are actually in a position where you can go out and play football for something."