

Focus on Kane as England face Senegal

REUTERS, Doha

The prospect of Harry Kane not scoring in any of England's group games at the World Cup might have left fans fearing the worst but instead there is a growing sense of optimism as Gareth Southgate's side eye Sunday's last-16 clash with Senegal.

Kane, whose 51 goals for his country puts him only two behind record holder Wayne Rooney, has yet to fully hit his straps in Qatar, barely having a shot on target.

England have still managed to score a tournament co-leading nine goals with their other forwards stepping up to the mark, none more so than Manchester United's rejuvenated Marcus Rashford with three goals already.

Southgate will need no reminding of what a wildly unpredictable tournament this has been so far and England's focus will have to be total at the Al Bayt Stadium on Sunday, even if history is on their side.

England have faced African opposition seven times at the World Cup without losing, while the African champions - who arrived in Qatar without their injured talisman Sadio Mane -- have lost eight of their nine World Cup knockout round games against European sides, although the one success came in 2002 when a Senegal side captained by Cisse beat Sweden to reach the quarter-finals.

While England will be expected to reach the quarter-finals, and face a possible clash with France, Southgate knows that any World Cup journey has bumps in the road and the 'Lions of Teranga' are a powerful side packed with experience and devoted to coach Aliou Cisse.

"Senegal will be tough," he said. "They're very well organised, they've got a lot of good individual players playing in big European leagues and their expectations now will rise."



Robert Lewandowski (L) is a deadly weapon up front for Poland but much of his side's chances against the defending champions France will depend on how they neutralise Kylian Mbappe (R) and company in the two side's round of 16 encounter at the Al Thumama Stadium tonight.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Poles in Les Bleus' path

AFP, Doha

There is arguably no player more thrilling than Kylian Mbappe at this World Cup, who leads France into their last-16 clash on Sunday with a Poland side whose own hopes of pulling off a famous upset will depend to a large extent on Robert Lewandowski.

It is a sobering thought that Mbappe, not 24 until later this month, may not yet be at the peak of his powers but he has already scored seven goals in 10 appearances at the World Cup.

His mission now is to help his country become the first to retain the World Cup since Brazil, with an even younger Pele, did so in 1962.

Mbappe has already scored three times in Qatar, including a brace in a 2-1 victory against Denmark that secured qualification for the last 16, and there is a belief he is thriving as the undisputed star of Didier Deschamps' side.

The situation is different to that of Paris Saint-Germain, where he shares the limelight with Lionel Messi and Neymar, and in that sense it may be that Karim Benzema's withdrawal due to injury on the eve of the tournament does no harm to French hopes.

"Kylian has no ego," insisted Deschamps a few days ago, going against the perception of Mbappe in the context of PSG.

It wasn't just Mbappe -- who now has as many

international goals as Zinedine Zidane -- that France missed as a second-string team lost 1-0 to Tunisia on Wednesday, a result that did not stop them topping their group.

He will be back along with the likes of Hugo Lloris, Antoine Griezmann and Olivier Giroud as France and Poland meet at a major tournament for the first time since the 1982 World Cup. In that game, Poland edged past France 3-2 in the third-place play-off.

On the other hand, Poland only just scraped through their group ahead of Mexico on goal difference and Lewandowski's strike -- his first World Cup goal -- in the win over Saudi Arabia was therefore crucial.

"I'm aware it might be my last World Cup and I wanted to be able to say that I've played and scored at World Cups," Lewandowski said after that game.

The 34-year-old also got nine goals in qualifying and there is nobody else quite on his level in Czeslaw Michniewicz's squad.

Seeing Mbappe and Lewandowski together on the same pitch is a rare treat.

Two of the most prolific forwards in the modern game, they are nevertheless different types of striker -- one all about explosive pace coming into the box from wide areas, and the other the ultimate penalty-box finisher now coming towards the end of his career.



ENGLAND VS SENEGAL

The two sides have never faced each other before.	PLAYERS TO WATCH	
	Marcus Rashford (England) Caps 49 Goals 15	Ismaila Sarr (Senegal) Caps 51 Goals 11



FRANCE VS POLAND

HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH	
	Matches 16	Kylian Mbappe (France) Caps 62 Goals 31
	France 8	Robert Lewandowski (Poland) Caps 137 Goals 77
	Poland 3	
Draw 5		



Lloris set to match France caps record

AFP, Doha

France's Hugo Lloris began his international career a few months after Lilian Thuram hung up his boots, and on Sunday the keeper will match the great defender's record of 142 caps when the defending champions take on Poland in the last 16 at the World Cup.

Thuram's career with Les Bleus ended on a bitter note, in a 4-1 defeat against the Netherlands in the group phase of Euro 2008, where France failed to make it into the quarter-finals.

The soft-spoken Lloris will not be making any fuss about matching Thuram's record, however, as he focuses on helping France secure a spot in the last eight in Qatar.

"It's no mean feat, I'm very honoured and proud of these numbers, even if on the eve of a World Cup Round of 16, this is obviously secondary," the 35-year-old Tottenham Hotspur keeper, who has spent 12,866 minutes between the posts for France, told a news conference.

Lloris, who has been in the starting lineup in all his appearances for France, has also captained the team a record 118 times and kept a clean sheet on 61 occasions - another France record - and was key in their 2018 World Cup winning campaign.

Liton-led 'improved' Bangladesh brace for India challenge

SPORTS REPORTER

Had it not been for the ongoing FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the hype and excitement among fans and media would have been tenfold higher surrounding India's tour of Bangladesh.

However, with the first of the three-match ODI series starting from today at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur, the World Cup fever seems to have overshadowed the much-anticipated rivalry between the two neighbouring countries.

But from Bangladesh's vantage point, the series against a star-studded Indian side will be the beginning of a new journey following the Tigers' T20 World Cup campaign last month.

Although the series is not part of the ICC World Cup Super League, facing India will surely go a long way in preparing Bangladesh for the upcoming ODI World Cup next year in India, for which the Tigers have already qualified directly.

Focus will be on Liton Das who will be leading Bangladesh in the ODI series in absence of regular skipper Tamim Iqbal after a groin injury sidelined the southpaw. The hosts will also miss in-form seamer Taskin Ahmed in the first ODI due to a back injury.

But Liton will not have a dearth of experience in the side, with Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad all fit and available for the series.

The Tigers will also look up to ace left-arm pacer Mustafizur Rahman, but expecting him

to roll back the years and bring back memories of 2015 when he had burst onto the scene with a scintillating performance in India's last tour of Bangladesh still seem far fetched as the 27-year-old has not had that mojo for a while now.

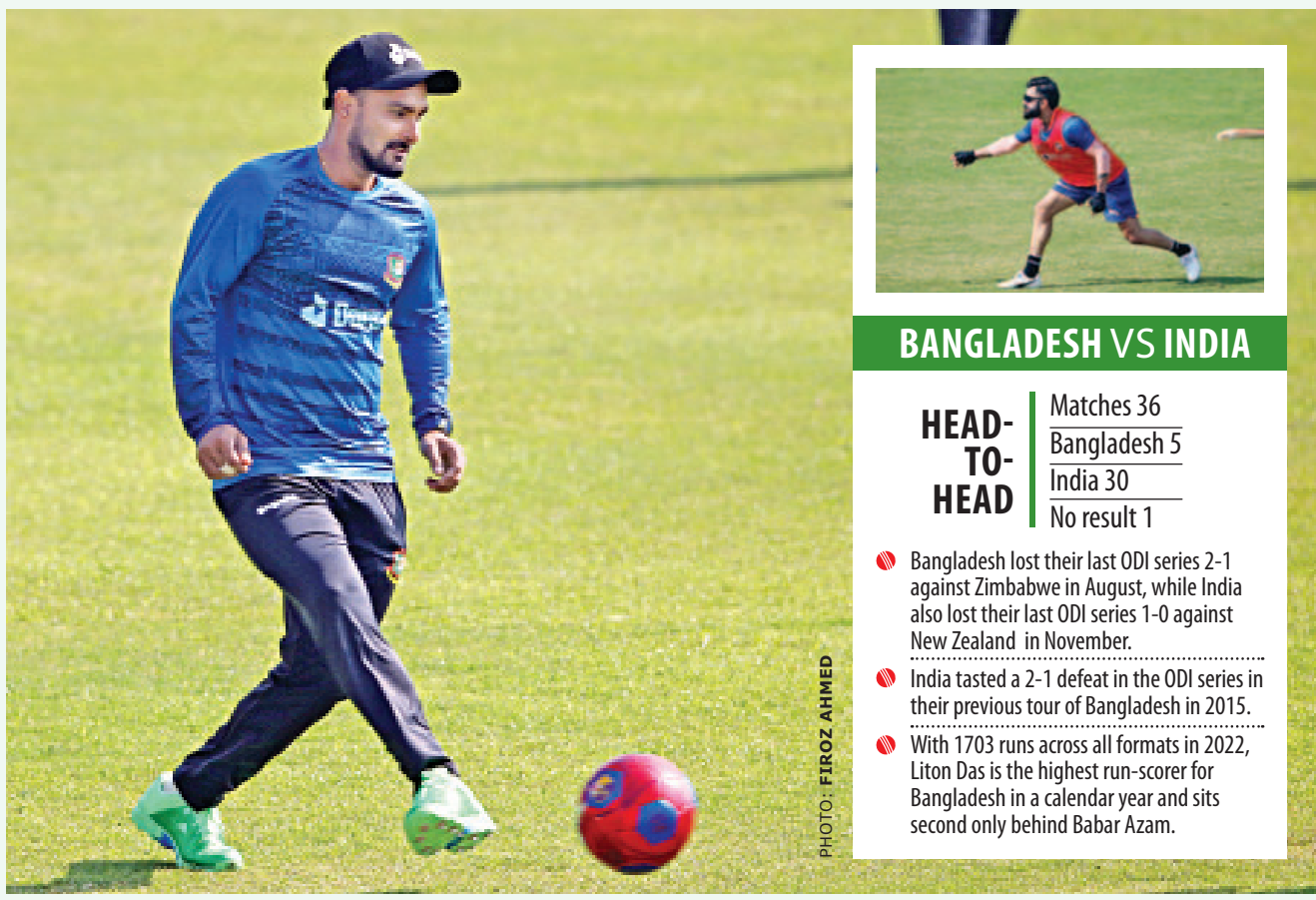
"Our only aim is to play for win and I think it's possible to beat them [India]. We have good bowling and batting units. Also, I have 2-3 players who have played international cricket for more than 15 years. I hope that I will get support from them. Our main focus is to win the series and more importantly we want to improve gradually and everyone is excited for the big series," Liton told the media yesterday.

Rohit Sharma and his troops, on the other hand, are taking this series as a build up for the next year's ICC ODI World Cup at home and with players like Virat Kohli, KL Rahul available for the series, it is apparent that India are in no mood to take the Tigers lightly.

"Oh, I think it has been an exciting rivalry for all these years," Rohit told the media yesterday.

"Bangladesh have been a different team in the past 7-8 years. They are a very challenging team and we did not have easy wins against them. We have to play good cricket to win. And every time we played them, it has been a very close encounter.

"Even in the T20 World Cup it was a close game. I think in 2015 we lost the series here. We know they have become a very improved team in the last few years. So we have to play our best cricket to win this. It is not going to be easy for us," Rohit said.



BANGLADESH VS INDIA

HEAD-TO-HEAD	Matches 36
	Bangladesh 5
	India 30
	No result 1

- Bangladesh lost their last ODI series 2-1 against Zimbabwe in August, while India also lost their last ODI series 1-0 against New Zealand in November.
- India tasted a 2-1 defeat in the ODI series in their previous tour of Bangladesh in 2015.
- With 1703 runs across all formats in 2022, Liton Das is the highest run-scorer for Bangladesh in a calendar year and sits second only behind Babar Azam.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED