



Feel-good Dutch ready for Messi

AGENCIES, Doha

A video of Louis van Gaal dancing into the team hotel after his team's victory over the United States went viral and there is no shortage of joy in the Netherlands camp as they prepare to face Argentina in the World Cup quarterfinals.

No strangers to a bit of in-fighting in the past, this Dutch squad is very much united as they gear up to face Lionel Messi and company on Friday with a semi-final place up for grabs.

"The vibes are good, we have a lot of fun times with the team, the communication with the trainers and the staff is very good. So yeah, the feeling is great," defender Jurrien Timber told reporters on Tuesday.

Barring the path to the last four is an Argentina team powered by Messi, who is trying to win the one major prize to elude him in his glittering career.

Captain Virgil van Dijk was wary of the Messi threat.

"It is not me against him, or the Netherlands against him, but the Netherlands against Argentina. No one can do it on his own, we have to come up with a good plan."

"The difficult thing about him is when we are attacking, he is chilling somewhere in a corner or something," remembered Van Dijk. "You have to be so very sharp in terms of defensive organisation. They always looked for him to try to make it difficult for us on the counter."

Van Gaal opined that he did not 'believe' in individuals. "I believe in teams. I don't believe in individual players."



Morocco coach Walid Regragui again showed his keen tactical touches, completely negating Spain as he intended ahead of their World Cup Round of 16 clash yesterday. The Spaniards enjoyed more than 75 per cent of the possession, but looked largely ineffective. Ultimately, regulation time finished goalless and the game went to penalties, where Morocco goalkeeper Yassine Bounou emerged as the hero, rebuffing three shots to set up an easy win in the shootouts.

PHOTO: AFP

Morocco ride Arab wave to history

REUTERS, Al Rayyan

Morocco rode a wave of passionate support and kept the World Cup dreams of the Arab world alive as they eliminated fancied Spain in a penalty shootout on Tuesday to reach the quarterfinals.

In doing so, they became the first Arab nation to advance to the last eight, ensuring a breakthrough for the region in the first global tournament in the Middle East, and also became the fourth African side to go this far in World Cup history. Their victory will be seen not only as a triumph for Morocco but vindication of the controversial FIFA decision to hand Qatar the hosting rights, adding significant gloss to another Arab success at the tournament like Saudi Arabia beating Argentina and Tunisia upsetting holders France in the group phase.

Morocco, who edged Spain 3-0 in the shootout after a 0-0 draw at the end of two hours of energy-sapping action, now have a chance to become both the Arab world and Africa's first-ever semi-finalists if they continue to use the overwhelming support that has backed them through an impressive array of results.

The ear-shattering cacophonous combination of singing, drumming, jeering and whistling from Morocco's supporters has created an atmosphere like no other in Qatar's stadiums.

Morocco were happy to allow Spain possession but in the end were desperately hanging on for the shootout as they battled injury and fatigue and lived dangerously in the closing stages.

"We fought and made the Moroccan people happy, we made history and Morocco deserve it, Moroccan people made us united on the pitch," coach Walid Regragui said.

Morocco defender Jawad Yamqi was proud of his team's performance. "We knew that Spain depend on their ball possession and we played with that in mind. They didn't impose any danger," he said.

"We honoured the Arab and African football, coach Regragui gave us the confidence that we needed in this game, a big boost in morale."

From the words uttered by Spain coach Luis Enrique and his players, it seemed that the Spaniards were struggling with the result.

"If we did anything, it was dominate the game. I am more than satisfied with what my team has done. They have perfectly executed my idea of football. I am proud of them," Enrique said, adding that this was not the time to be weighing up his future with the national team.

Enrique also revealed that he had chosen the first three penalty-takers.



I hope we can prove that. But of course individual quality can always decide a match. All those top countries have those kinds of players. Of course Messi is the most important player of them, the most creative."

Frenkie de Jong also underlined the importance of playing as a team. "We have to try to dominate the game and make sure that we as a team are better than Argentina," said De Jong. "We are not just playing against Messi. We have to focus on playing really well as a team."



Domingo backs misfiring veterans

SPORTS REPORTER

A series victory beckons for Bangladesh when they take on India in the second ODI in Mirpur today, hoping to repeat the feat of 2015 – the last time India visited for a bilateral series.

The Tigers arrive with a 1-0 lead in the three-match series after they pulled off a stunning one-wicket victory which looked unlikely at one point before Mehedi Hasan Miraz and Mustafizur Rahman's gritty effort with the bat.

While the morale would be high in the dressing room and despite head coach Russell Domingo's suggestion that there were no headaches regarding the batting, the middle-order effort of veterans Mushfiqur Rahim and Mahmudullah Riyad in the last game has raised concerns over lean patch.

The duo contributed with a 33-run partnership in the first ODI during a fifth-wicket stand but then departed in consecutive deliveries, leaving India with more than a foot in the door. Both batted at strike-rates of 40 and could neither find boundaries while having played 45 and 35 deliveries, respectively, or pick momentum up. With both players past their mid-thirties, Domingo had to field questions on whether their performance curve was on the decline.

"Firstly, I'm going to defend my players. Mushfiqur retired from T20s," Domingo said when asked whether after



Bangladesh pacer Ebadot Hossain's (L) four wickets in the first match proved influential in a memorable triumph in the first ODI against India, where Mehedi Hasan Miraz (C) emerged as the hero for Bangladesh. Mustafizur Rahman kept it tight and the spotlight will be on these three again.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

'being dropped' from T20 setup, such performances signal a 'declining curve' for the duo.

"Second point is, in the last two games in Zimbabwe, Mahmudullah got 80 and 39. I'm very reluctant to say that (they are in decline). Players have times in their career when they are searching for runs. It was one ODI ago that he [Mahmudullah Riyad] got 80. I have no concerns with him at the moment.

"All players go through these phases in

the older phase of their careers. I still have a lot of faith in his ability and batting," he divulged.

The head coach had been working with the 36-year-old at net session yesterday. Batting to throwdowns from Domingo, Riyad was bowled down his leg-side and Domingo was seen discussing head position and tendency to fall over. Riyad appeared to have worked out the tiny adjustments he needed.

"It was about his intensity. I think his

intensity dropped as he was looking more to survive than to score. That's why he missed that half volley on leg stump. If he was looking to score, he would have probably hit that for two or four.

"It is just making sure that we get into the routine and rhythm of being more positive than looking to survive," Domingo said on what he discussed with Mahmudullah.

Keeping faith in Mahmudullah would mean Yasir Ali may not get a game today but with 12 scheduled ODIs as per FTP schedule until the 2023 World Cup, Domingo said there was opportunity to look into different combinations.

"[Yasir] Rabbi did it in South Africa, got a fifty. He came into a couple of difficult situations in the T20s with only a couple of overs left. Afif [Hossain] for me is the guy at the backend. I am still backing Mahmudullah's ability and experience to get us out of tricky situations," Domingo said.

The Tigers may also not field Taskin Ahmed with Domingo suggesting they 'do not want to risk playing him yet' despite the pacer returning to net session yesterday following an injury.

India opener Shikhar Dhawan, meanwhile, said at his press conference that his side had analysed and rectified some of the issues in the first ODI, while opining that the intensity of the crowd keeps the visitors 'on our toes', highlighting that the rivalry is enjoyed.

'True party' from another era

IRESH ZAKER

A deep tradition of footballing rivalry dictates that I should not be particularly fond of Roy Keane. The former Ireland captain and Manchester United legend was a particularly prickly thorn during his playing days for us Liverpool supporters. But there was a grudging respect. We resented his combative style but only amongst ourselves, never to the outside world, as we longed for such an enforcer of our own.

So, I find it a little rich that Keane termed the Selecao's post-goal dancing "disrespectful". Seriously, anyone who did not find joy in the way Brazil went about their business last night was either Roy Keane, an ardent Argentina fan, or just a massive old bore!

I am not a Selecao fan per se. If anything, I was rooting for South Korea to make things interesting on Monday night. But I am a football fan, and what I saw last night melted my hard old heart. You don't see football like this anymore. You just don't witness such joyful abandon.

In today's ultra-technical world of high-stakes football, fun is too often sacrificed for results. Of course, there is excitement in the high press and high energy style employed by my boys at Anfield. There is mastery in the possession-based style employed by Pep Guardiola's charges at the Etihad.

However, more often than not, players and managers make choices that are guided by an ethos of maximizing results as opposed to a philosophy of enhancing beauty. But last night, it was not to be.

Back in September, Pele took to social media to encourage Vinicius Jr. never to back down in the face of abuse. "Football is happiness. It's a dance. It's a true party," he wrote. "We will not allow racism to stop us smiling," he added. "Dance Vini," implored the maestro.

And dance they did. And play they did. And party we did, even if only in our hearts.

It was football from another era. You could be forgiven for seeing a little Junior in Vinicius' dinked a cross to Paqueta, a little Vava in Richarlison's headed dribble leading to his goal, a little Garrincha in Neymar's jig through two defenders and the referee.

It was as if the fondest spirits of Brazil's past and present had come together to pay glorious tribute to O Rei (The King), as Pele is called in Brazil.

One could imagine him smiling that famous smile from a hospital bed in Sao Paulo.

Dance Vini, he might have whispered. And dance, Vini certainly did.

Anything less than hoisting the trophy would be considered a disappointment for this Brazilian team. But if they continue to play like this, anything less than the ultimate prize will be forgiven with gratitude by true lovers of the sport.



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