

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.

Defender Nathan Ake said the players felt very much together.

"We know when to relax and get our heads a little bit out of the football, but we know when to focus as well, and that time is coming very soon," he added.

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 an honour to play against him," said Van Dijk before deflecting any one-on-one comparisons ahead of the meeting at the Lusail Stadium. "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 will have to come up with a good plan."



Before they bounded over to their reveling supporters, before they clapped their hands and mounted one another's backs, and before they circled Stadium 974 after their latest World Cup victory, the Brazilian players paused and thought of the King. They gathered at midfield after 90 minutes of prancing and dancing, and a 4-1 win over South Korea. They pulled out a banner with a single word, the single word that has been on a lot of minds here in Qatar.

PHOTO: REUTERS

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"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. I hope we can prove that. But of course we play against teams that have a lot of individual quality and 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. Those are always the most important players."

Frenkie de Jong thinks also underlined the importance of playing as a team, adding that he had no fear.

"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."



'Our way is to dance'

AFP, Doha

Brazil's players have divided opinion after they celebrated their goals in the 4-1 World Cup mauling of South Korea with some extravagant dance moves, with even their coach getting in on the act.

The pre-tournament favourites put on a fearsome display of attacking football on Monday to send South Korea home and set up a quarter-final in Qatar with 2018 runners-up Croatia.

Tite's side took the lead in just the seventh minute through Vinicius Junior and Neymar scored from the penalty spot on his return from an ankle injury as the Koreans were outclassed.

But it was the manner of the exuberant celebrations during the game that caught the eye of many, with the Brazilians rolling out a set of choreographed dance moves.

"Look, I've never seen so much dancing, it's like watching Strictly," said former Manchester United captain Roy Keane, referring to a popular TV show in Britain, in which celebrities compete in a dance contest.

"I just can't believe what I'm watching, I really can't," added the famously scathing television pundit. I don't like this, I think it's really disrespecting the opposition."

Even Tite did a jig with his players in front of his dugout after Richarlison scored a classy third for Brazil in the 29th minute. The Tottenham forward said they had been practising their dance moves.

"This cheerful and happy atmosphere is important, the professor's joy infects us on the field," he said of the coach.



The 61-year-old Tite also defended the celebrations.

"There are always spiteful people who will understand it as disrespect," he said. "I told the players to hide me a little, I know about the visibility."

"I didn't want it to have any other interpretation than the joy of the goal, the result, the performance, but not disrespect for the opponent or (South Korea coach) Paulo Bento, for whom I have a lot of respect."

Alexi Lalas, the former United States stalwart who played at the 1994 World Cup, said he was all for the colourful celebrations.

He told Fox Sports: "If you are somebody out there that frowns and is grouchy and grumpy about soccer players dancing after they have scored a goal, or about Brazilian players dancing after they score a goal, and have some misguided concept of what sportsmanship is... then I feel sorry for you."

"I feel sorry for the life you live that has no joy."

"If you want to dance, if you want to sing, if you want run around like a crazy person, you do whatever it is you want to do to celebrate the greatest moment in our beautiful game."

Tite had explained on the eve of the tournament that he would never think of telling them not to dance.

"It's a characteristic we have, and we are natural about it wherever we are," he said. "Just as we respect Arab culture and that of other countries, we have to respect our own. We respect our way of being."

"Is it happiness? Yes. It is a moment of concentration and seriousness, and there are some other moments. Goals are the greatest moment of celebration and each person can translate that in their own way. And our way is to dance. While respecting the opponent, but it is. It is also self-respect."

'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.



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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



'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.