



England players were quick to warn that while Kylian Mbappe would dominate headlines ahead of their quarterfinal against France, the rest of the players representing the defending champions should not be underestimated. Meanwhile, the French enjoyed a bubbly training session, although Mbappe was reportedly not present.

PHOTO: STAR

Di Maria returns to training

AGENCIES, Doha

Argentina forward Angel di Maria took another huge step in his rehabilitation as he joined the national team's training session yesterday.

It is still a touch-and-go situation as he works his way back to full fitness, but the sign was encouraging especially considering the Juventus star had only recently started training by himself.

Di Maria missed the final group-stage match against Australia and also the Round of 16 clash against Poland.

His chance of being in the starting eleven against the Dutch will depend on how he manages the load, which will be gradually increased, in training over the next few days. At minimum, he is expected to be a substitute.

A further concern for Argentina was the sprained ankle suffered by Papu Gomez against Australia.

Di Maria may take his spot, but if he is unfit, a range of possibilities open up. Lisandro Martinez could come in and form a back three, Leandro Paredes could move into midfield or Lionel Scaloni may even opt for Lautaro Martinez for a two-pronged attack alongside Julian Alvarez.

Adding more spice to a potential return against the Dutch will be di Maria's complicated relationship with Netherlands coach, Louis van Gaal.

England wrestle with Mbappe conundrum

AFP, Doha

England manager Gareth Southgate is wrestling with the biggest dilemma of his reign as he tries to plot a way to stop the "sensational" Kylian Mbappe in Saturday's World Cup quarter-final.

Southgate's hopes of leading England to a third successive semifinal at major tournaments hinge on finding a solution to a problem that has proved impossible for any team to solve in Qatar.

Just how do you subdue a player with Mbappe's lethal combination of electric pace, balletic skill and clinical finishing?

Poland defender Matty Cash summed up the conundrum posed by Mbappe after the Paris Saint-Germain forward's brilliant two goals in France's 3-1 last-16 victory on Sunday.

"I didn't know whether to drop off or go tight," Cash said. "When I went tight he just spun in behind. When he gets the ball, stops and moves, he's the quickest thing I've ever seen."

"He's a different level. Speed, movement, look at his finishing. He's got everything."

Four years after playing a key role in France's World Cup triumph in Russia, Mbappe is the tournament's most feared player.

The 23-year-old already has five goals in four games in Qatar, while his haul of nine career World Cup goals puts him level with Argentina's Lionel Messi and one ahead of Portugal star Cristiano Ronaldo.

Now it is Southgate's turn to sit the daunting Mbappe exam.

"Look, he is a world-class player who is always producing the moments when they are needed. That is what those top players do. That is the challenge we face," Southgate said.

So what will Southgate do to combat Mbappe's threat?

England full-back Kyle Walker says his team cannot afford to obsess about France's free-scoring forward. Right-back Walker is likely to be directly up against Mbappe.

"I know he's a top player but we're not playing tennis. It's not a solo sport, it's a team game," Walker said. "We know he's a great player and that's why he's the focus of all questions. But let's not forget (Olivier) Giroud, who has scored countless (goals), (Ousmane) Dembele, for me just as good on the other wing."

Walker has come up against Mbappe for Manchester City in the Champions League and said the lesson was not to over-focus on the 23-year-old.

"When we played PSG in the Champions League, we were not just thinking of Mbappe and it's going to be the same. Yes he's a tool in their armoury -- and a very good one -- but you can't underestimate their other players," he said.

"I can't think of another right-back in the world that I'd want to put up against him," former England defender Gary Neville said of Walker's chances of subduing Mbappe.

"Kyle will go closer to him, he has more pace than the Polish

defenders. That's not to say Kyle will mark him out of the game. This is a sensational player, the new best player in the world."

As well as Walker winning his one-on-one duels with Mbappe, Neville believes it is essential to reduce his service from Olivier Giroud and Antoine Griezmann. "If they can stop the service to Giroud and Griezmann in that central area, it means Mbappe's receiving far less dangerous passes," Neville said.

But no matter how much England plan, Cash knows from painful experience that nothing can truly prepare them. "I spent the afternoon watching his clips, but I'm watching the videos while lying in bed. In real life, he's burning my legs, that's the difference, he said.



Argentina fans had reason for optimism as experienced forward Angel di Maria returned to training with the team yesterday.

PHOTO: TWITTER

CR7's spotlight shifts to sidelines

AHMED BIN PARVEZ

Minute 74. Portugal on the verge of a thumping victory over Switzerland in a one-sided Round of 16 encounter of the FIFA World Cup 2022 on Tuesday night, leading 5-1. On the sideline stood Cristiano Ronaldo, waiting for his turn to make his 21st appearance on the World Cup stage, but for the first time as a substitute.

By then, he had seen Goncalo Ramos power his way into a World Cup hat-trick, the 21-year-old's shotgun celebration indicating a changing of the guard.

Cristiano hugged the hat-trick man and entered the field. Pepe, the captain for the day, was very quick to come and adorn him with the armband. Portugal were winning resoundingly, but the 37-year-old gave the look of a man defeated, perhaps to his own ego and ambitions.

Just before the Round of 16 encounter, Portugal head coach Fernando Santos clearly stated he did not like Cristiano's attitude after being subbed off in the previous match against the South Korea.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Manchester United boss Erik Ten Hag, who had even punished the Portuguese talisman for his behaviour.

The number of times Cristiano has shown public discontent towards his manager over the past few years is astounding, but no longer surprising.

An air of arrogance may enhance performances at the peak of one's powers,



After Cristiano Ronaldo was left on the bench for Portugal's Round of 16 clash with Switzerland on Wednesday, cameramen in the stadium swarmed the Portuguese dugout while the teams sang their national anthems ahead of kick-off, hoping to get what could be a defining image of CR7's career.

but also becomes a slow poison when age catches up. It is proving an extremely difficult pill to swallow for a man like Cristiano, who had set goal-scoring records for fun, always being the centre of attention and the main man for club and country, with or without the armband.

From Madeira to Madrid, Cristiano's ascendancy to the top was a rough ride.

However, the journey depicted dogged resilience, flashes of nonchalant flair, power, trickery, and the indomitable will to be the best in the world.

By the time Cristiano went to Real Madrid, he was already lauded as one of the best on the back of staggering numbers and trophy-laden successes. Transitioning from a pacey winger to

THE LATERAL VIEW

Parenting wisdom upholds

IRESH ZAKER

A long-held parenting wisdom dictates that you should not give your children too much too soon. Children who easily get whatever they want do not develop the skills to deal with adversity. And when they do, they tend to face a distinct disadvantage in terms of coping ability.

Perhaps it is because I have a three-year-old, but ever since the really young Spanish team had their way in a seven-nothing romp versus Costa Rica in their first game, I feared they would be in trouble once things got tough.

Sure enough, La Roja had not managed to win another game in the tournament and crashed out in spectacular fashion against the Atlas Lions on Tuesday night. It kind of reminded me that I should hide the chocolates at home.

Speaking of parents, the Moroccans seem to be a family-oriented group. We saw Achraf Hakimi being hugged by his mother in the stands, and it has been reported that some players, and even the manager, are being accompanied by both or

one of their parents in Qatar. I think we can thank these boys on behalf of guardians around the world for providing us with solid justification for chaperoning our charges.

I picture my child saying one day, "But dad, I want to go on this trip with just my friends!" To which I would reply, "You know nothing child! Just look at that Moroccan team, it is wonderful stuff!"

In a rebuke heard around the world, Portuguese manager Fernando Santos benched the heretofore untouchable Cristiano Ronaldo, and seemingly benefited from it. The last few months are providing a melancholy coda to CRon's legendary football career. Ousted by his club, he now seems destined to relegation by his own country.

No one, or at least no true football fan, wanted things to turn out this way. Love him or hate him, and as a Liverpool supporter I have many reasons for the latter, you cannot deny Ronaldo's place in the pantheon of greats. He deserves to bow out in a less ignominious manner.

But for that to happen, Ronaldo himself has to understand that he is, at thirty-seven, not the player that he once was. He cannot effectively be the focal point of his team for ninety minutes. He can, however, contribute mightily within a more limited capacity. For that he needs to set aside his personal ego and trials, and project the positivity that his teams can benefit from.

My favorite CRon moment was him selflessly cheering on his teammates from the sidelines as they won the 2016 Euro. That or a gleeful cameo, where he pulls off yet another miracle from his considerable bag of tricks, is what we want to see and remember.

an out-an-out poacher, CR7 modelled and re-modelled his game, even around injuries, and found unparalleled success. In most cases, that was good enough. His success meant his team's success.

With time though, people started to question Cristiano's definition of success. His hunger to score and be the main man at times eclipsed the needs of the team. Football is a team sport after all, and Cristiano needed one last re-modelling to compensate for his age and the transition in football philosophy worldwide.

He perhaps needed to appreciate his role as an impact goal-scorer rather than the first name on the team sheet. Still, on his path to the ultimate success, the mountain is seemingly getting steeper each passing day.

Portugal have made it to the quarterfinals, and World Cup glory for him and his compatriots is just 3 wins away.

It appears that CR7 may now have to channel his ego for his country's sake. In his head, he believes he is the best, but in a team game, perhaps his best is to come off the bench and contribute.

The only way he can get his limelight now is by not craving for it anymore. A glorious career like his deserves a glorious ending.

Cristiano needs to rediscover the joy of football rather than burdening himself with pressure to perform at the highest level.