



Moroccan horde in Deschamps' path to history

SPORTS REPORTER from Doha

Didier Deschamps has a couple of records in his sights. He can become the first man in World Cup history to guide his side to the title twice as a manager after having lifted the trophy as captain in 1998.

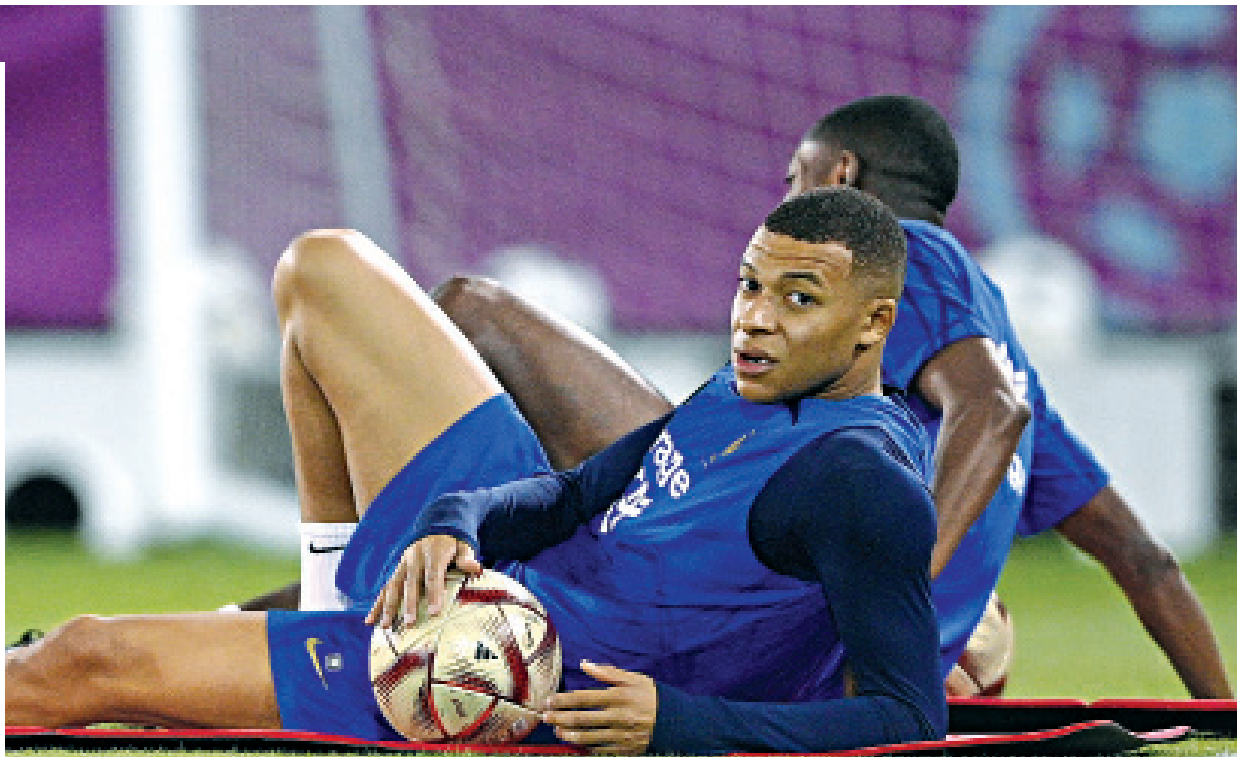
Mario Zagallo of Brazil and Franz Beckenbauer of Germany have won the title both as captain and coach, but neither of them won two as a manager. Deschamps can also guide Les Bleus to becoming only the third team in history, after Italy in 1938 and Brazil in 1962, to defend the title.

Despite these records in touching distance, the 54-year-old is not losing sight of the immediate task on hand: getting past a spirited Moroccan side in the second semifinal on Wednesday at the Al Bayt Stadium.

As defending champions, France go into the match as clear favourites, but with utmost respect for their giant-killing opponents and prepared for a hostile reception from the Atlas Lions supporters.

"They're benefiting from a huge support, I've seen this and my observers have told me about. We know it's going to be extremely noisy, it's part of the context and we'll have to be ready for it," Deschamps told a news conference on Tuesday.

France captain Hugo Lloris, who won a French record 143rd cap in their quarterfinal win over England, said they had utmost respect for Morocco. "We can only have respect and admiration for what they have done, but nothing happens by chance at this level," Lloris said. "When a team is capable of beating Belgium, Spain and Portugal, and finish top of their group, it is because they have lots of quality on the field and undoubtedly off it too, in terms of cohesion and team spirit."



Kylian Mbappe will have to blitz past his friend and Paris Saint-Germain teammate Achraf Hakimi when title defenders France take on Morocco at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor on Wednesday. Both Mbappe and Hakimi hold each other in high regards, but there will be no room for love or friendship when they find each other in collision course.

PHOTO:AFP/REUTERS

Friendship takes backseat with greatness in sight

NABID YEASIN

France's Kylian Mbappe is set to meet his good friend Achraf Hakimi once again at this World Cup. But this rendezvous is definitely going to be very different than their first meet-up which was at the team hotel of Morocco in downtown Doha where the France forward paid his Paris Saint-Germain teammate a visit just about a week ago.

Their meet-up last week was marked by an Mbappe tweet: A picture showing the two youngsters with arms around each other and the caption including emojis of the Morocco flag, a crown and a hand-gestured heart shape – in that order.

A different kind of hospitality will await Mbappe, though, on Wednesday at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor where the Moroccan right-back, rated as one of the very best by the supersonic French forward himself, will be on duty to stop the darting runs of his friend.

"ACHRAF HAKIMI. BEST RB IN THE WORLD," Mbappe had tweeted in January.

The duel will be a fascinating one for fans to enjoy. Seeing Mbappe, the top-scorer of the tournament so far with five goals in as many games, go up against

Hakimi, who has remained an integral part of the best defensive backline in the World Cup that only conceded once, that too from an own goal in the group stage, must be entertaining even for neutrals.

Probably, Hakimi has also been anticipating a great confrontation as the full-back sent a tweet to his close friend Mbappe after it was confirmed the two would be facing each other in the World Cup semifinal. "See you soon my friend," wrote Hakimi on December 10.



INFO ZONE

FRANCE VS MOROCCO

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Matches 11
France 7
Morocco 1
Draw 3

PLAYERS TO WATCH

Kylian Mbappe (France)
Caps 64
Goals 33

Achraf Hakimi (Morocco)
Caps 59
Goals 8

Mbappe, as expected, was given special attention by England in Saturday's quarterfinal, where he was remained largely ineffective even though the French still won the game and progressed.

Morocco have no such similar plans, their coach Walid Regragui told a news conference on Tuesday ahead of the clash.

"I am not going to try and set up any particular tactical plan to counter Kylian," he said.

As far as Regragui is concerned, Hakimi will know it better how to keep Mbappe in check.

"Achraf knows Mbappe better than me and trains with him on a daily basis, so he's better placed than I am to know

how to deal with Kylian. Hakimi is one of the best players in the world, so it's going to be a great duel between the two," Regragui said.

Regragui's assertion could be backed with strong logic. Born in space of just over a month between each other, Hakimi and Mbappe have forged a beautiful friendship since the Moroccan moved to PSG in July 2021. From rehearsing celebrations together to sharing the same taste in music and video games – as claimed by Hakimi – the two footballers go beyond their connection on the football field. Hakimi also mentioned how Mbappe teaches him French.

Both friends will be chasing different ambitions. While Hakimi would want to be the first African player in the World Cup final, Mbappe would like to help France become the first side since Brazil in 1962 to defend the title and, along with it, also earn the right to hold aloft the World Cup that has remained elusive to even greats for the second time at a young age of 23.

And as it seems, with greatness in sight for two of the World's finest talents, friendship is set to take a backseat in Qatar today.



Having scraped past England in the quarterfinals despite being bossed in terms of key statistics, Deschamps doesn't see the need for any alteration to his game plan against Morocco, who are dangerous on the break and quick attacks.

"We want to have the ball to create danger, but you saw that in our game against Poland (in the last 16) they actually had it more than expected," said Deschamps. "We're as good as Morocco on the break and on fast attacks. We won't abandon possession, but when we will have the ball, we're going to have to make it count."

Deschamps' side have defied a glut of injuries, rumours of disharmony and the curse of the reigning champions to come this far in the tournament. Coming into the semifinals as the most convincing side of the tournament despite having key players such as N'golo Kante, Paul Pogba, Christopher Nkunku and Lucas Hernandez out injured, speaks volumes about Les Bleus' strength in depth and of character.

Deschamps' charges are just two wins away from making history, and even if the majority of fans may wish to see Morocco emerge as winners, there will be few betting against a France victory.

With overwhelming support, Morocco 'dare to dream bigger'

ATIQUE ANAM from Doha

Ever since the four semifinalists were decided, the streets and buses and metros in Doha have been occupied by fans mostly from Argentina and Morocco, with a large number of fans shuttling to the Qatari capital over the last few days.

The Royal Air Maroc commissioned 30 special flights from Casablanca to Doha so that the Moroccan fans can experience a once-in-a-lifetime event. The streets and metros of Doha, over the last couple of days, have turned into a stream of Moroccan red, with a spattering of the French Blue here and there. Just like the Albiceleste, the Atlas Lions have found their 12th man in the stands.

Jamal Eddine, a telecom employee from Marrakesh, believes the Atlas Lions can have one over their former colonists.

"We never thought our team would come this far in the World Cup. But every time we won against a big team, our dream has only got bigger. Now we believe we can not only win the semifinal but also win the

title as well. Our players are no less than those of any European or South American countries," Jamal said as he was rushing to the training session of the Atlas Lions for a 15-minute glimpse of his team's stars.

Jamal's confidence was shared by Morocco's coach Walid Regragui, who took charge of the national team following the dismissal of Vahid Halilhodzic, despite the Bosnian successfully guiding the Northern African country to their fifth World Cup appearance. Regragui, now a celebrity name in Morocco and beyond, united the whole squad and brought out the best in the team, evidenced by their run to the semifinals at the expense of Belgium, Spain and Portugal.

"We are a very ambitious team, we are hungry. But I don't know if it will be enough... it can be. We are confident and are determined to rewrite the history books," the 47-year-old coach said at the pre-match press conference. "I know we are not the favourites, but we are confident. You might say I'm mad but I think a bit of craziness is good."



There is a good reason for Regragui's optimism. This Morocco squad, 14 of whom play in top foreign leagues, have been together for some time. The core of

the team includes five or six players who also featured at Russia 2018, not least the likes of Yassine Bounou, Hakim Ziyech, Achraf Hakimi, and Sofyan Amrabat.

While the Atlas Lions have scored only five goals in the tournament so far, they boast the best defensive record, having conceded only one goal, that too an own goal in a group stage match against Canada. There has been some criticism of their defensive block and counter-attacking approach, but the coach implied there would be no change to their tactical approach, "What good is 70% possession if you only get a few shots on goal?"

Morocco were still struggling with "a lot of injuries" said the coach, but players were recovering. There are concerns over the first-choice centre-back pairing of skipper Romain Saiss and Nayef Aguerd in particular.

Coming into this tournament as rank outsiders, the Atlas Lions have shown that anything is possible if you have unity and you can dare to dream. Tonight the whole of the Arab world and the African continent and many neutrals all across the globe will be hoping that Morocco can extend that dream by slaying the defending champions.