



What to WATCH

BTV, GTV, T Sports
Croatia vs Morocco
Live from 09:00 pm
T Sports, GTV, Sony Six
Bangladesh vs India

1st Test, Day 4
Live from 09:30 am
Ten 2
Australia vs South Africa
1st Test, Day 1

Live from 06:20 am
Ten 2
Pakistan vs England
2nd Test, Day 1
Live from 11:00 am

Mystery virus looms over France

AFP, Doha

Several France players have caught colds, the French Football Federation said, as they prepare for the World Cup final against Argentina, with Raphael Varane and Ibrahima Konate the latest to fall ill on Friday.

Centre back Dayot Upamecano and midfielder Adrien Rabiot missed Wednesday's 2-0 semi-final win over Morocco with the illness.

Coach Didier Deschamps refused to panic after Wednesday's game and said they were being careful to ensure the illness did not spread.

Striker Randal Kolo Muani, who came off the bench to score France's second goal in their win over Morocco, said on Friday: "There's a little flu that's been spreading but nothing serious. They'll be well soon and be ready for Sunday."

A French press officer added: "As you know, Randal is not a doctor, we will communicate about it later."

Kolo Muani said the players who fell ill had been isolated.

"Those who are sick stay in their room, they're being taken care of by the doctors and we've been enforcing social distancing. We're very strict about it," he said.

Forward Ousmane Dembele said: "We're not scared of that virus. Dayot and Adrien got a bit of a stomach ache, I made them a ginger and honey tea and then they felt better. I hope everyone will be ready for the final."

"Dayot got better and I think everyone will be ready. We've been taking precautions. The first day, Dayot stayed in his room and we brought him food and he was back with everyone the next day."

Deschamps was confident both Upamecano and Rabiot would be fit for Sunday's showdown at the Lusail Stadium.

"Dayot will be fit. Since Saturday he wasn't well for three days ... had a fever and that had an impact on his strength," he said on Wednesday.

"Given the tough match we had I decided not to play him and play Konate instead as he's shown he's good enough to play at this level."

"Rabiot was sick, was better this afternoon but not well enough so he stayed in the hotel. We have four days to rest so he should be better and available for Sunday."

Should Konate and Varane be out, however, Deschamps would face a difficult selection decision, as he would be without two of his top three defenders.

With all the players that France are missing currently, they could have fielded an eleven that would be capable of challenging for the World Cup trophy.

N'Golo Kante, Paul Pogba, Present Kimpembe and Matt Maiga were ruled out ahead of the tournament while Karim Benzema, Theo Hernandez and Christopher Nkunku left Qatar after picking up injuries.

Including the latest spate of defenders in that list forms one of the stronger sides in the world.

France manager Didier Deschamps is chasing history, with the opportunity to become the first coach since World War II to win back-to-back World Cup trophies. The 54-year-old also won football's greatest prize as a player and captain in 1998, but his greatest attribute as manager has been the way he has handled the fragile egos a traditionally fractious French locker room and birthed a generation on the cusp of defining World Cup football in the modern era.

PHOTO: AFP



Deschamps happy to shun the limelight

REUTERS, Doha

No coach has ever won the World Cup twice in the post-World War II era and France's Didier Deschamps is one victory away from entering the record books when they take on Argentina in the final on Sunday in Qatar.

But ask the Frenchman about his chance at rewriting history when he can become the first to win the World Cup twice as a coach and once as a player, he steps away from the spotlight, happily allowing his beloved squad to be the focus instead.

"I'm not the most important thing here, the team is. Of course, I'm proud and we all know there's a chance now to defend our title in the final," Deschamps said. "So that's a great achievement already. We'll do everything we can to ensure we're happier on Sunday evening. I don't really think about myself. I'm pleased with the fact that we've had this success."

Deschamps is the fourth manager to lead a country to back-to-back World Cup finals after Vittorio Pozzo (Italy), Carlos Bilardo (Argentina) and Franz Beckenbauer (West Germany), with the latter two losing one final each.

But his lasting legacy will be uniting a France squad that, in the past, had been fractured by in-fighting and impertinence before building a squad that knew how to go deep in tournaments.

Having captained France's 'golden generation' that won the 1998 World Cup and the 2000 European Championship, the 54-year-old has now nurtured another golden generation over the past decade.

As a coach, Deschamps guided France to the European Championship final on home soil in 2016 where they narrowly lost to Portugal in extra time, the 2018 World Cup final where they thrashed Croatia and now the showpiece match in Qatar.

"We call him the lucky charm but his best quality is his ability to build a squad," former France international Patrice Evra said. "Sometimes he won't pick the best players because his motivation is 'the team is the star'... He's someone who can build a squad to win a tournament. He's just an amazing manager and he's so humble... For me he's the greatest French manager by miles!"

What also set Deschamps apart is his trust in youth despite the truckload of talent available to him. That trust came to the forefront when he started the relatively inexperienced midfield duo of Youssouf Fofana and Aurelien Tchouameni -- who had 25 caps between them -- for the semi-final.

"Well, experience isn't everything, they have great qualities and they play at very top clubs," Deschamps said. "Maybe they need experienced players to guide them, but they have quality... I had no doubt about putting them in there."

What has made Deschamps successful in tournaments, especially at the World Cup since 2018, is not sticking to a particular identity or philosophy which is often the defining feature of big teams.

Instead, he has adapted to circumstances and opponents.

There have been games where France had dominated possession while in others they have been happy to cede the ball and hit teams on the counter-attack.

The second tactic worked wonders in the semi-final against underdogs Morocco, who had reached the last four playing with very little possession but struggled to make good use of the ball as France sat back.

"When you think you're close to winning against France, you're actually quite far. We will learn from this for the future, it leaves a bitter taste," Morocco coach Walid Regragui said. "Didier Deschamps has shown he's the best head coach in the world in the last 10 years."



Mihajlovic no more

REUTERS, Rome

Sinisa Mihajlovic, who played for and coached numerous Italian Serie A teams and was famed for his spectacular free kicks, died on Friday after a long battle with cancer.

Mihajlovic was sacked as manager of Serie A club Bologna in September after they failed to record a win in their first five league matches. The Serbian had become Bologna manager for the second time in 2019 and had been in charge while battling leukaemia.

His playing career included lengthy spells at Sampdoria and Lazio and he also managed Serbia.

"You fought like a lion on the pitch and in life ... you are and you will always be a winner," Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said in a tweet as tributes began to flood in from inside and outside the football world.

Mihajlovic's death, confirmed by his family in a statement, went immediately to the top of websites in Italy, where he played for most of his career. He also managed a number of clubs, including AC Milan.

"Goodbye boss, you will always live in our hearts," Bologna said in a tweet.

"Heaven has gained another legend. You will be sorely missed Sinisa," was the message from AC Milan.

A midfielder or defender, Mihajlovic scored a number of spectacular goals from free kicks.

He made his name as part of the Red Star Belgrade team that won the European Cup in 1991.

He moved to Italy the following year when he joined AS Roma and went on to play for Sampdoria, Lazio and Inter.

His coaching career began at Bologna in 2008 and took in stints at Catania, Fiorentina, Sampdoria and Torino, as well as AC Milan, where he was in charge for less than a year.

Was the risk worth it?

SPORTS REPORTER from Chattogram

Bangladesh were left staring down the barrel after India declared at 252 for 2 following Cheteshwar Pujara's ton. Having been bowled out for 150 in the first innings in the morning session of day three, the Tigers' bowlers had to suffer due to two of their specialist bowlers in skipper Shakib Al Hasan and pacer Ebadot Hossain being unable to bowl due to injuries. With Shakib facing injury troubles a day ahead of the Test match, there appeared to be some confusion regarding his availability. The team management took a chance with Shakib playing on as batter who may not be able to bowl long spells. The question remains whether to play Shakib in the end was worth the top-order shuffle and the lack of bowling options in the second innings.

Media reports suggested that opener Mahmudul Hasan was dropped so that Taijul Islam can slot into the team as backup. The decision meant Najmul Hossain was promoted to opening role alongside Zakir Hasan and Yasir Ali promoted to the all-important number three slot. Liton Das, Bangladesh's most prolific performer in Tests recently, was sent in at number four for the first time.

Bangladesh's first innings debacle had seen India firmly on top after day two as they picked up eight wickets. Only a 42-run stand between Mehedi Hasan Miraz and Ebadot Hossain saw them reach 150 on day three. Despite being able to bat,



India opener Shubman Gill reached a milestone in the first Test against Bangladesh at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram on Friday as the dashing right-hander scored his first Test century smashing eight fours and two sixes along the way. He was eventually caught at deep mid-wicket off Mehedi Hasan Miraz. The 23-year-old took a bow to mark his special moment. His previous best of 91 against Australia came in a winning cause and he will be looking at his bowlers to get the job done again.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

FIFA to 'revisit' plan to scrap four-team groups

AFP, Doha

FIFA looks set to revise plans to introduce three-team groups for the 2026 World Cup, world football chief Gianni Infantino said on Friday.

FIFA had previously indicated that the 2026 finals, which will expand to 48 teams from 32, would see countries divided into 16 groups of three during the first round. Under that format, the top two teams in each group would advance to a 32-team knockout tournament.

However, FIFA president Infantino said the thrilling success of the existing first-round format at the Qatar World Cup had prompted a rethink.

"The groups of four have been absolutely incredible until the last minute of the last match," Infantino said. "We have to revisit or at least rediscuss the format, whether it's 16 groups of three or 12 groups of four. This is something that will be on the agenda in the next few weeks."

Infantino added that the World Cup format for 2026 could be modelled along the lines of the Euros, which has six groups of four, with the four best third-placed teams also advancing to the knockout rounds.

Infantino said the enlarged competition would lead to a financial bonanza for FIFA. Asked to explain the huge projected increase, Infantino cited the expanded number of teams and the size of the North American market.

"We are bullish about the power of football," Infantino said. "We are convinced the impact of the game will be massive. It has been massive here and it will be incredible in North America. Three huge countries, 48 teams."

"More games, revenues will go up in terms of broadcasting, in terms of sponsorship, hospitality."



REAL GET THEIR MAN

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti met with his newest and most-hyped recruit in recent years as the 16-year-old Endrick, signed from Palmeiras for a fee that could reach up to 72 million euros. However, fans will have to wait for the prodigious Brazilian, who cannot join Real Madrid until the summer of 2024, when he turns 18.

Ebadot was unable to bowl in the match since taking the wicket of Shreyas Iyer on day two following back issues. Thus Liton bowled for the first time in his career and Yasir turned his arms for a few along with Shanto in order to give Miraz, Taijul and Khaled Ahmed a breather as the three had a lot of workload.

"He [Ebadot] was in a bit of pain. But it's not a major injury. Obviously every moment in a Test match is challenging and bowlers have to bowl for a long time. If you look at Taijul bhai, he bowled really well in first innings. In the second innings they were playing for runs. It was a challenge for bowlers on this sort of wicket. Maybe if Ebadot was there we could have bowled a bit more tightly," Miraz said in the press conference regarding Ebadot's injury and the workload for the rest of the bowlers.

"Certainly we missed him [Shakib] and he did not bowl because he was having pain. It's difficult to bowl when you have pain. He tried couple of overs in the first innings," he said about Shakib.

"Shakib still has some pain and he did not risk bowling. His injury situation is improving though," a BCB source informed.

Mehedi Miraz also admitted in press conference that a result is likely now in the first Test. Bangladesh reached 42 for no loss in the second innings. "Either we will win or they will win. The batters definitely have to bat with responsibility," Miraz said.