



EUROS RETURN with many contenders

AFP, Berlin

Euro 2024, beginning in Germany on June 14, is a mouth watering prospect, as France and England lead the heavyweight contenders for a tournament which will be played out in some of the continent's finest stadiums across a football-mad nation.

The setting for the month-long competition is important, given the underwhelming nature of the last Euros three years ago, held all over the continent rather than in one country, and played before limited crowds during the Covid pandemic.

This time all fans will descend on 10 stadiums in Germany, many with memories of the unforgettable summer of 2006 when the country last staged a major tournament.

That 2006 World Cup was won by Italy, who come into this European Championship as title holders, but it also saw Germany emerge again as a force to be reckoned with after years in the doldrums.

Back then there were question marks about the host nation's chances, yet they reached the semifinals.

There are similar doubts this time surrounding Julian Nagelsmann's team, given Germany have exited the last two World Cups in the group stage and lost in the last 16 at the last Euros.

However, it would be foolish to talk down the three-time European champions too much given the players at their disposal.

There are good reasons why France and England are widely seen as the favourites to raise aloft the Henri Delaunay trophy at

GROUP (A) GERMANY SCOTLAND HUNGARY SWITZERLAND	GROUP (B) SPAIN CROATIA ITALY ALBANIA	GROUP (C) SLOVENIA DENMARK SERBIA ENGLAND
GROUP (D) POLAND NETHERLANDS AUSTRIA FRANCE	GROUP (E) BELGIUM SLOVAKIA ROMANIA UKRAINE	GROUP (F) TURKEY GEORGIA PORTUGAL CZECH REPUBLIC

The top two teams from each group along with the four best third-place finishers will progress to the round of 16. That will be followed by the quarterfinals, semifinals and the final.

OPENING FIXTURE
Germany vs Scotland, June 15, Saturday, 1:00 am

FINAL
July 15, Monday, 1:00 am

Berlin's Olympic Stadium on July 14.

France are Europe's top-ranked nation and have been in the last two World Cup finals. Their team has evolved since Qatar in 2022 but the quality at their disposal, beyond Kylian Mbappe, is fearsome and they are eager to win a first European Championship since 2000.

It is not always the case that everything goes to form. But if it does, and France and England top their groups, they will be on a collision course to meet in the semifinals at Signal Iduna Park.

England carry the burden of never having won the Euros. Beaten on penalties by Italy in the 2021 final, Gareth Southgate's

team lost a nail biting quarterfinal to France at the last World Cup.

The two men who could give them the edge are Harry Kane and Jude Bellingham. Kane will be at home in his surroundings having just scored 44 goals in his first season for Bayern Munich.

Munich's Allianz Arena hosts the first semifinal. The other semifinal venue was Bellingham's home ground for the three years he spent at Dortmund, but he comes to the Euros after a fine first campaign at Real Madrid, fresh from winning the Champions League.

Absent from the last two World Cups, Italy will be in Germany to defend their European crown, despite losing twice to England in qualifying.

The Azzurri are in a group with Spain, semifinalists at the last Euros but who have not won a major tournament knockout game in 90 minutes since Euro 1912.

There may be as many as eight realistic potential champions, including 2016 winners Portugal, still led by Cristiano Ronaldo, even though he is now 39.

Belgium and the Netherlands will hope to make an impact too, but the Euros — the third edition since expanding to 24 teams — is richer for the presence of less-fancied nations.

Albania, under the Brazilian Sylvino, appear at only their second Euros, while Georgia make their debut.

Managed by former France and Bayern Munich defender Willy Sagnol, and led by Napoli winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia, they will be worth watching.

Their tournament starts on June 18 against Turkey in Dortmund.

AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Euro 2024 will be the 17th edition of the competition and only the second occasion that the tournament will be hosted by Germany after West Germany hosted the tournament in 1988.
- ▶ Italy's triumph in the 2020 edition - their second European Championship - meant the Azzurri became the fourth side to have won the competition more than once after Germany (3), Spain (3), and France (2).
- ▶ Ten nations have won Europe's most elite international prize. Russia (as the Soviet Union) won the inaugural edition in 1960 beating Yugoslavia 2-1 in the final.
- ▶ Spain became the first team to win consecutive European Championships, in 2008 and 2012 respectively.
- ▶ Only on three occasions has a host nation gone on to win the title, with the latest side in that regard being France back in 1984. Spain (in 1964) and Italy (in 1968) are the other two sides to have triumphed on home soil.



- ▶ The tournament has seen 22 penalty shootouts overall. The first shootout took place in the 1976 final between Czechoslovakia and West Germany. It included one of the most iconic penalties ever scored as Antonin Panenka disguised a delicate chipped effort into the goal to secure Czechoslovakia the title.
- ▶ Netherlands hold the record for netting the most number of goals in a match. They thrashed Yugoslavia 6-1 in 2000 which remains the only time a team has scored six in a European Championship game.
- ▶ Cristiano Ronaldo tops the all-time scoring charts in European Championship history with 14 goals, five clear of second-placed Michel Platini. Ronaldo's goals have come across five different editions while Platini scored all of his nine goals in France's title-winning 1984 edition. Platini holds the record for most goals in a single edition.
- ▶ Ronaldo also holds the record for most appearances in Euros with 25 in total.
- ▶ Austria's Ivica Vastic became the competition's oldest goal-scorer at 38 years and 257 days when he converted a penalty in stoppage-time against Poland in the 2008 edition. Cristiano Ronaldo, aged 39 and set to feature in his sixth European Championship, will be eyeing to make that record his own.
- ▶ At 40 years and 86 days, former Hungary goalkeeper Gabor Kiraly, who played in the 2016 edition, became the oldest player to feature in the competition. He also garnered a lot of attention for goalkeeping wearing his grey sweatpants.

FIVE PLAYERS TO WATCH

JUDE BELLINGHAM
(ENGLAND)

Fresh from helping Real Madrid to La Liga and Champions League glory in his first season in Spain, Jude Bellingham turns his attention to trying to end England's 58-year wait for major tournament glory.

The 20-year-old is part of a star-studded array of attacking talent alongside Harry Kane, Phil Foden and Bukayo Saka.

Bellingham played in a deeper role at the 2022 World Cup but he has thrived in the more advanced position given to him by Carlo Ancelotti this season, scoring 23 goals.

Victory at the Euros could also position Bellingham as the leading candidate to win this year's Ballon d'Or — awarded to the world's best player.

KYLIAN MBAPPE
(FRANCE)

Speculation over Kylian Mbappe's future has finally been put to bed, with the forward making his way to Real Madrid from PSG.

The 25-year-old has faced accusations that he has wasted some of his prime years in his homeland.

After becoming the first teenager since Pele to score in a World Cup final to help France to victory in Russia in 2018, he became the first player since 1966 to net a hattrick in the 2022 World Cup final which Les Bleus lost to Argentina on penalties.

But Mbappe also has a score to settle at the Euros. He missed the crucial penalty in France's shock last 16 exit to Switzerland three years ago, having failed to score in the coronavirus-delayed tournament.

FLORIAN WIRTZ
(GERMANY)

Florian Wirtz carries the hopes of the home nation after playing a starring role in Bayer Leverkusen's unbeaten German league and cup double.

Germany have suffered a rare fallow period, bowing out at the group stage of each of the past two World Cups and the last 16 at Euro 2020.

Wirtz, named the Bundesliga's player of the season, offers hope that a new generation can rejuvenate the fortunes of the three-time European champions under Julian Nagelsmann.

Both a goalscoring threat and creative hub, Wirtz, 21, netted 18 goals and provided 20 assists as Leverkusen reached the Europa League final on top of their domestic dominance.

CRISTIANO RONALDO
(PORTUGAL)

Cristiano Ronaldo continues to defy Father Time as he prepares to take part in a record sixth Euros at the age of 39.

Already the all-time top goalscorer in the competition, with 14 goals, the five-time Ballon d'Or winner is still setting new scoring landmarks in Saudi Arabia.

Ronaldo broke the Saudi Pro League record with 35 goals in his first full season in the Gulf.

Portugal have been in supreme form, winning all 10 of their Euro qualifiers.

However, coach Roberto Martinez must decide whether to trust in Ronaldo or to go with a younger, more mobile focal point to his attack such as Diogo Jota or Goncalo Ramos.

RODRI
(SPAIN)

Manchester City's FA Cup final loss to Man United was Rodri's first defeat for club or country since March 2023, excluding penalty shootouts.

In a Spain squad lacking the star names of the past, the 27-year-old is now the standard bearer.

"He's the best midfield player in the current world by far," said City coach Pep Guardiola, himself a former midfielder.

Rodri's tenacity out of possession and poise on the ball will be the foundation on which Luis de la Fuente can build.

The three-time European champions will need it as they are in the toughest-looking group alongside defending champions Italy, World Cup semifinalists Croatia and Albania.