



Argentina hope for MESSI BOOST

AGENCIES

Defending champions Argentina will hope for their star man and skipper Lionel Messi to be back for their crucial Copa America 2024 quarterfinal tie against Ecuador at the NRG Stadium in Houston on Friday morning.

Messi returned to training on Monday as they prepare to face Ecuador in a rematch from the 2021 Copa America quarterfinals, in which they breezed past Ecuador 3-0 and eventually lifted the trophy.

Messi had not trained since sustaining a groin/thigh injury during his side's 1-0 win against Chile on June 25. He sat out Argentina's 2-0 victory over Peru on Saturday.

The Argentine football federation said the 37-year-old did some kinesiology work before training and was with the rest of the group afterwards.

The Albiceleste topped Group A with a 100 percent record while Ecuador held Mexico to a 0-0 draw, finishing second in Group B.

Statistically

| COPA AMERICA 2024 QUARTERS | | |
|---|--------|---------|
| MATCH | DATE | TIME |
| Argentina v Ecuador | Jul-05 | 7:00 AM |
| Venezuela v Canada | Jul-06 | 7:00 AM |
| Colombia v Panama | Jul-07 | 4:00 AM |
| Uruguay v Brazil | Jul-07 | 7:00 AM |
| All fixtures are as per Bangladesh time | | |

speaking, the opening phase of this tournament was nearly flawless for Lionel Scaloni's men, who won their three encounters and did not concede.

All five of their goals scored in the opening phase came in the second half, and they have not fallen behind in a Copa America match since the 2019 semifinals (2-0 loss versus Brazil).

What augurs well for Argentina is the potential return of Messi in this game, even though coach Scaloni will be cautious about not overusing the little magician. But even without Messi, Argentina should have very little problem against Ecuador, a team against which the Albiceleste have dominated over the years.

Argentina have never lost to Ecuador at the Copa America while the World

Cup holders have advanced beyond this stage on four successive occasions.

Argentina's pedigree in the competition will also make them hopeful of cruising to last four.

The Argentines have won eight consecutive matches across all competitions and have only conceded two goals over that stretch.

Their last three appearances in the quarterfinals of this tournament have been a breeze, with Argentina winning those encounters by a combined margin of 9-1.

Only once in this century have we seen them lose a quarterfinal fixture at this tournament, when they hosted this event in 2011 and were beaten on penalties by Uruguay (5-4).

Meanwhile, Ecuador are capable of pulling off an upset on their day but will have to outdo themselves to stand any chance against Scaloni's troops.

Despite being on the back foot for a good portion of their previous encounter, Ecuador did enough to hold off the Mexicans and claim a spot in the knockout phase on goal difference.

It is the second successive time that La Tri have qualified for the last eight of this tournament, while they have now made the quarterfinals in three of the previous four Copa Americas.

The Taskin scenario and its timing

SPORTS REPORTER

Before an important board meeting on Tuesday, which was set to shed light on how Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) assessed the just-concluded T20 World Cup performances of the national team, news broke that pacer Taskin Ahmed had missed the India game for having overslept.

A series of poor performances in World Cups is nothing new, and an explanation for the team's poor approach, especially in the Afghanistan game, should have been a top priority for the board. The timing of the news about Taskin was curious, as it took the limelight away from what was, in fact, a poor World Cup performance despite securing a place in the Super Eights.

What happens inside the team environment usually stays out of public knowledge, but this time the news about Taskin was leaked quite some time after the World Cup game in question.

Shakib Al Hasan, meanwhile, who usually keeps mum regarding anything inside the team's environment, had talked about Taskin missing the team bus on Tuesday evening before leaving for USA.

Thus, when BCB president Nazmul Hassan attended the press conference following the board meeting on Tuesday, it could be surmised



Crown-favourite Gauff on redemption run

REUTERS, London

Coco Gauff did not look at her imperious best under the roof on Wimbledon's Court One on Wednesday, but she was always in control of an error-strewn second-round 6-2, 6-1 victory over Romanian qualifier Anca Todoni.

The US Open champion slipped and fell twice on the slick court and muttered to herself during the one-hour, six-minute match against an opponent ranked 140 places below her.

Secondseed Gauff, a crowd favourite at Wimbledon after announcing her arrival on the big stage with a fourth-round run as a 15-year-old five years ago, produced 16 unforced errors in the short match and managed to land only 43% of her first serves.

But her nervous opponent, at 19 six months Gauff's junior, hit 23 unforced errors and could not find her range against the fleet-footed American, who wrapped up the match with a drop shot that Todoni could only send wide.

Gauff, who suffered a humiliating first-round exit last year at the hands of compatriot Sofia Kenin, said she had learned from that disappointment and from her triumph at the US Open to manage expectations and emotions.

"Overall, I just learned about life a lot. What I do, I'm very passionate about but it's not ever that serious," she said.

"It's a game, it's sport. Sometimes the world can make you feel like there is so much pressure and expectation."

The draw has opened up for Gauff after the first-day withdrawals of Belarusians Aryna Sabalenka, the Australian Open champion, and former world No. 1 Victoria Azarenka. She will next play British qualifier Sonay Kartel or France's Clara Burel.



Stacked fixtures await cricketers

SPORTS REPORTER

Following the T20 World Cup, it seems Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is waiting for their coaches and players to finish the ongoing break in order to start preparation for their next international assignment -- a two-match Test series against Pakistan, scheduled to be held in August.

Although Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) is yet to confirm the itinerary of the series, which is also part of the ICC World Test Championship 2023-25 cycle, Bangladesh are expected to tour Pakistan for the first time since 2020.

According to chief selector Gazi Ashraf Hossain Lipu, they are planning for some practice matches during their camp for the Pakistan series in order to prepare themselves for red-ball cricket -- a format which they last played in March-April against Sri Lanka.

"The players are on a break now and after that, the schedule of the camp will be announced formally. There are some suggestions from our head coach. There are plans to play some warm-up matches," Ashraf told The Daily Star yesterday.

The BCB is currently running



two camps -- High Performance (HP) unit in Rajshahi and Bangladesh Tigers in Chattogram -- simultaneously. Nearly 50 cricketers are preparing for two scheduled High Performance and A team tours in Australia and Pakistan, respectively.

According to camp officials, national players like Shadman Islam and Shahadat Hossain Dipu, who are part of the Bangladesh Tigers camp, are set to feature in both Australia and Pakistan tours before the Test series.

The first contingent of HP unit, which will play two four-day matches against Pakistan Shaheens between July 19 and 29, is expected to leave Dhaka for

Australia on July 14. HP unit will also play a 50-over tri-series and a T20 series, featuring a different set of players.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh A will leave for Pakistan, with a few players from the HP unit joining the team from Australia, to play two four-day matches and three one-day matches on August 6.

"The A team will leave for Pakistan on August 6. During the tour of the A team, our national team will arrive in Pakistan. We are actually operating all three programmes at the same time," said national selector Hannan Sarkar, who also mentioned that the HP squad will be announced in two-three days.

ROAD TO EURO QUARTERS

Showdowns, young guns and own goals

AFP, Stuttgart

Euro 2024's quarterfinals kick off on Friday with a blockbuster match between hosts Germany and Spain as the tournament heads towards its decisive final week.

Big boys clash

Germany's clash with Spain in Stuttgart pits the Euros' two best performing sides against one another at least one round earlier than fans would have liked, due to an unbalanced knockout bracket which has four serious candidates for overall victory on one side.

The winner of Friday's tie will face either Portugal or France, both former European champions.

Meanwhile, England face Switzerland on Saturday after having scraped past Slovakia in the last 16 and find themselves in the last eight having played way below expectations in each of their four matches.

Big name flops

The Euros has brought together some of the best footballers on the planet but none of the biggest stars have shone so far as the big teams -- Spain and Germany apart -- have mostly been below par.

Cristiano Ronaldo looks like he's gone one tournament too far while Kylian Mbappe has



just a group stage penalty to his name and is a long way from the phenomenal form which won him the golden boot at the last World Cup.

England pair Jude Bellingham and Harry Kane, respectively La Liga player of the year and the Bundesliga top scorer, have played way below expectations despite scoring all four of England's goals.

Young guns & ageing icons

Records have fallen in Germany at both ends of the age spectrum. Spain winger Lamine Yamal, 16, is dazzling having become the

youngest player ever to feature at a European Championship. Should he strike in the quarters or beyond, he will become the youngest scorer in the tournament's history.

By contrast Croatia's Luka Modric set a new record for the oldest at 38 by netting against Italy and Portugal duo Ronaldo, 39, and Pepe, 41 (now the oldest-ever Euros player), could yet surpass the Real Madrid midfield maestro.

Own goals on fire

While the continent's star strikers have failed to fire, there have been nine own goals at

this Euros and the record of 11 set at the last championships three years ago looks sure to be broken.

Prior to Euro 2020, there had just been 11 in the tournament's history.

The most comical came in Turkey's 3-0 thumping at the hands of Portugal, when Samet Akaydin unwittingly doubled the deficit by playing a sloppy back pass which ended with Zeki Celik and goalkeeper Altay Bayindir bundling into the net in a vain attempt to keep the ball out.

The majority, though, have come from dangerous crosses, like Riccardo Calafiori handing Spain a 1-0 win over Spain in one of the most anticipated games of the group

stage.

Spain's Robin Le Normand, Czech defender Robin Hranac and Austria's Maximilian Woeber all found their own net in similar fashion as attempted clearances to low crosses have gone wrong.

Underdogs shine

The plodding, static performances of France, Belgium, England and Portugal -- FIFA's four highest-ranked sides before the tournament -- have been offset by some brilliant underdog showings.

Despite being the lowest-ranked team, Georgia's run to the last 16 lit up the tournament, particularly their 2-0 victory over Euro 2016 winners Portugal.

Romania had won just one of their 16 games at the championships heading into Euro 2024 but topped a group featuring Belgium, Ukraine and Slovakia, before going down to the Netherlands in the last 16.

Turkey have however emerged as the tournament's true dark horses, booking a spot in the quarterfinals with a brilliant 2-1 win over fellow upstarts Austria on Tuesday.

Vincenzo Montella's Turkey and Georgia also played the best game of the group stage, a 3-1 win for the Turks in front of a pulsating crowd in Dortmund.

| EURO 2024 QUARTERS | | |
|---|--------|----------|
| MATCH | DATE | TIME |
| Germany v Spain | Jul-05 | 10:00 PM |
| Portugal v France | Jul-06 | 1:00 AM |
| England v Switzerland | Jul-06 | 10:00 PM |
| Turkey v Netherlands | Jul-07 | 1:00 AM |
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