



PHOTO: FACEBOOK/AFP

## Toughest task yet for Spain

AGENCIES

Spain have looked in imperious form in their four straight wins so far at Euro 2024, giving their eagerly anticipated quarterfinal match-up with hosts Germany on Friday the air of a "final before the final".

The squad have moved on from the possession-based "tiki-taka" style that helped them win the World Cup and back-to-back European Championships over a decade ago to a ferociously attacking approach over a year under the guidance of manager Luis de la Fuente.

This transformation may have surprised many fans, but players like midfielder Mikel Merino have seen it coming for almost a decade, as have many of his teammates who have worked with De la Fuente in their national academy system.

And that camaraderie is what gives Spain the edge, Merino felt.

"It is a huge advantage for us," Merino said. "It's a chemistry that I have only seen

- ➊ This will be the fourth meeting between Germany and Spain at the Euros. Spain hold the edge having won in 1984 and the 2008 final, while Germany clinched the contest in the 1988 edition.
- ➋ Spain are unbeaten in their last four major tournament matches against Germany (W2 D2).
- ➌ Germany went through to the semifinals in 15 of their 19 quarterfinals at major tournaments (World Cup and Euro), including wins in all four last eight appearances at the

in club football."

Indeed, Spain have been playing with lightning high pressure combined with lightning one-touch moves and precise passing, giving the impression of a squad where each player has an almost instinctive feel for the positioning of his teammates.

"I have a lot of great memories about playing against Germany. Playing them

- Euros (1996, 2008, 2012, 2016).
- ➋ No host nation has ever been eliminated in the quarterfinals of the Euros.
- ➌ Spain have scored nine goals, while Germany have 10, which is already their joint-most in a single edition of the competition.
- ➍ Toni Kroos has completed 95% of his passes at the tournament (411/431), the highest by a player to attempt 300+ passes at a European Championship since 1980. He also leads this edition for line-breaking passes (125).

it's something that make you feel your blood pump stronger in your veins," Merino said.

"We know we are going to face maybe our toughest challenge yet," Merino said.

Meanwhile, hosts Germany will be riding a wave of belief not seen in the proud football nation for almost a decade.

Germany veteran and 2014 World Cup winner Toni Kroos said Wednesday "the

goal is to win the tournament".

A player with an unblemished record of success, six-time Champions League winner, Kroos believes the will to win comes "only through experience".

"You can have a winning mentality or belief, you can live it, but it's hard to convey it in conversations."

"You have to go through experiences and that's how your belief grows more and more."

Kroos will do battle against Spain, the country he has lived in for the past decade.

He said his knowledge of the Spanish players from his time at Real was no clear advantage, saying "they are all pretty well known."

"I don't think we're expecting any big surprises."

Kroos may not be expecting big surprises from Spain, but the new-look Spanish side who have somewhat shed their decade-long style of play will definitely be the biggest thorn in the hosts' way to another European glory.

## Djokovic survives major scare

REUTERS

Even though Novak Djokovic was nursing a dodgy right knee, toppling him at Wimbledon was never going to be easy for a Briton ranked 277th and so it proved as the Serb huffed and puffed into the third round with a 6-3 6-4 5-7 5 win over Jacob Farnley.

The wildcard, who was ranked outside the world's top 500 just a month ago before shooting up almost 250 spots after winning a second tier Challenger event in Nottingham, will take away many memorable moments from his Centre Court debut.

He is unlikely to forget the high-risk, high-reward strategy he employed in the final game of the third set, which ended with Djokovic hacking a forehand wide to surrender his serve and the set - to the delight of the hollering crowd.

But all the heroics from a journeyman Scot, who until this week had never won a main tour match or even competed at a Grand Slam, were simply not enough to tame a player chasing a record-extending 372nd Grand Slam match win.

A forehand winner sealed Djokovic his passage into round three and kept him on course to win a record 25th Grand Slam title.

## SHORT CORNER

### Erik ten Hag signs new deal at Man Utd



Erik ten Hag has signed a contract extension that keeps him at Old Trafford until 2026, the Premier League club announced on Thursday. The former Ajax manager, whose deal had been due to expire in 2025, admitted there was work to be done to close the gap on United's Premier League rivals.

### Empty seats at Copa, a stark contrast to Euros

Copa favourites such as reigning champions Argentina and Brazil advanced to the quarterfinals playing in sold out stadiums but the less heralded teams have played in half-empty arenas. Games at the Euros averaged 50,000 spectators per game in the group stage.

### Bangladesh, India, Pakistan in same group in proposed CT schedule

Bangladesh find themselves in the same group as archrivals India and Pakistan along with New Zealand in the draft schedule of the ICC 2025 Champions Trophy submitted by the tournament hosts Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB).

Read full stories on The Daily Star's website.

## Mbappe or Ronaldo: Who will come through?

AFP, Hamburg

France and Portugal renew their European Championship rivalry on Friday night in a quarterfinal showdown in which almost all of the focus will be on the two captains, Kylian Mbappe and Cristiano Ronaldo.

The last-eight encounter in Hamburg brings together two of the most-fancied nations coming into Euro 2024, but two teams who have not been completely convinced so far in Germany.

France have reached a sixth quarterfinal in the last seven major tournaments



despite not one of their players scoring a goal in open play.

Mbappe has been hindered by the broken nose he suffered in France's first match against Austria, forcing him to miss the goalless draw with the Netherlands.

He has not been at his sharpest since returning and the spot-kick he converted against Poland is the only goal he has scored in seven appearances at the Euros.

The other side of the coin for France is that they have only let in one goal.

Meanwhile, Portugal reached this stage having needed a shoot-out to beat

Slovenia following a goalless 120 minutes.

Goalkeeper Diogo Costa ended up being their hero by saving all three of Slovenia's efforts from the spot, but the game will also be remembered for Ronaldo's tears after he had a penalty saved in extra time.

The 39-year-old's quest to become the oldest-ever goal-scorer at the tournament also led to him missing numerous attempts during that game.

It has all added fuel to the fire for those who feel Ronaldo is holding back a supremely talented Portugal side, but coach Roberto Martinez is likely to back the forward.

Portugal must now try to find a way through a watertight French defence, while Didier Deschamps needs to find a replacement in his midfield for the suspended Adrien Rabiot.

With France being one of the most solid defensive sides at the Euro, the question will be whether a misfiring Ronaldo will be able to help Portugal find that spark.

The margins will likely be fine again this tie and the outcome will possibly be determined by a moment of genius. For that, Portugal are likely to keep Ronaldo in place while French eyes will be firmly fixed on Mbappe finally delivering.

## Bruzon, Kings 'AMICABLY' SPLIT

SPORTS REPORTER

After six years of remarkable achievements and a string of titles with the country's contemporary powerhouse, coach Oscar Bruzon has parted ways with five-time Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) champions Bashundhara Kings.

Bruzon revealed the news through Facebook yesterday, while Kings president Imrun Hasan also confirmed that they would not be renewing the contract with the 47-year-old coach.

The Spaniard wrote, "Dear BK family, I wanted to express my gratitude for the positive manner in which we reached a mutual agreement to terminate our contract after 6 years of continuous success including a participation this season at the prestigious Asian Champions League. I appreciate the opportunity to part ways amicably and with full understanding for both sides."

He added, "We have contributed on developing a unique football culture in



the country, key to the long-term growth and exclusively focused on excellence delivering great results including 11 Major Titles and a last season treble. Proud to have been part of the Kings dominance."

The Spaniard was successful in the domestic circuit, winning a total of 11 trophies since the Kings started their journey in the professional football league in the 2018-19 season.

However, Bruzon failed to take the formidable Kings out of the group stage in the AFC Cup four times, despite having quality foreign footballers.

It has been learned that his relationship with club officials had deteriorated last season, while the foreign players were openly involved in scuffles during BPL matches. Bruzon, however, gave a hint of it in his parting post, mentioning the need for Kings officials to "put aside their personal and particular interests" to keep the success ongoing.

"Some have to understand that the only way to achieve success is to work as one team."



India's T20 World Cup winners returned home to a heroes' welcome yesterday, greeted by euphoric fans while parading on an open-top bus through the Marine Drive seafront in Mumbai. The Rohit Sharma-led team had first arrived in New Delhi from the West Indies and met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The team waved to fans and danced to drums at their hotel in the Indian capital before leaving for their bus parade in Mumbai where fans gathered in huge numbers.

PHOTO: AFP