

Shootout voodoo exorcised but concerns remain for England

REUTERS, Duesseldorf

England fans woke up on Sunday not quite sure whether to celebrate a remarkably confident shootout performance that sent them into the Euro2024 semifinals or lament another display of caution and inertia by their players and manager.

On the profit side of the ledger was a shootout that should, finally, banish the folk memory of all the penalty pain that preceded it since the first of many defeats by West Germany in the 1990 World Cup semifinals.

Cole Palmer, Jude Bellingham, Bukayo Saka, Ivan Toney and Trent Alexander-Arnold all looked as if they would score, and all did so, expertly.

It should not have come as a surprise as Palmer, Toney and Saka are all regular and hugely impressive penalty takers for their clubs, while Bellingham and Alexander-Arnold are among the sweetest strikers of a ball in the game.

With goalkeeper Jordan Pickford going through the full repertoire of “taking control” before saving Manuel Akanji’s weak effort, it was an exemplar of how to go about a shootout.

Factoring in a Nations League playoff, also against Switzerland, England have now won three of their last four shootouts under Southgate, having lost six of their seven before that.

England now have a very winnable game against the Netherlands, who have stumbled and scrapped their way into the last four, with the possibility of a third major final appearance and first on foreign soil tantalisingly close.

And yet, behind the singing and dancing, looms the uncomfortable truth

» England have won just four penalty shootouts in their history but two of them have come against Switzerland, in 2019 in the UEFA Nations League and tonight at Euro 2024.

» England have reached the UEFA Euro semi-finals in consecutive tournaments for the first time.

» Switzerland have now been eliminated in all five of their major tournament quarter-final appearances: the 1934, 1938 and 1954 World Cups, and Euro 2020 and 2024.

» For just the second time in their 10th shootout at a major tournament (World Cup/Euros), England scored every single one of their penalties in the shootout (5/5), also doing so against Spain at Euro 96 (4/4).



that England have got this far largely playing very poorly, certainly in attack.

Their defence has been very good, with every opponent generally kept at long range, but despite boasting an extraordinary array of talent in their ranks, England have been nothing short of boring.

On Saturday, Saka’s 80th-minute equaliser was their first shot on target, just as Bellingham’s extraordinary equaliser against Slovakia was, in the 95th minute.

The average world ranking of the teams they have beaten -- Serbia, Denmark, Slovenia, Slovakia and Switzerland -- is 35, yet, other than in fleeting patches and moments of individual brilliance, never have now fifth-ranked England looked a dominant team.

They were better on Saturday in terms of probing for openings, but on the few occasions they did get behind the Swiss defence, the quality of cross or final pass was awful.

Southgate had, laughably, said on Friday that his mentality was to “go for it”, yet England did anything but. On one occasion late in the game they took a short corner that, three touches later, ended up at the feet of their own goalkeeper.

For all the problems, however, England are still there, while Germany, Italy, Belgium and Portugal et al are not, and that’s a scenario the fans would have gobbled up at the start of the tournament, however, it has been achieved.

‘Lion-hearted’ Dutch to ‘go for it’

REUTERS, Dortmund

The Netherlands feel they have an unexpected opportunity to achieve something special at the European Championship after a gritty comeback to beat Turkey on Saturday and advance to the semifinal.

Their 2-1 victory in a tension-filled quarterfinal in Berlin has set up a last-four meeting with England in Dortmund on Wednesday and a chance to move closer to reprise their only major tournament success, at the last Euros that Germany hosted in 1988.

“We are going to play two more games, if all goes well,” coach Ronald Koeman -- who played in the 1988 winning side -- said after his men put together a determined showing to overcome a halftime deficit against Turkey.

“Nobody expected this. But our mission is not over yet. If you play a semifinal, you also want to reach the final.”

Koeman looked to get ahead of himself, however, when asked which country he

would like to face in Sunday’s final. “I prefer to play against Spain because we have already played against France in the group stage,” the coach said.

Then he checked himself: “We have to beat England first.”

Koeman will know better than most what it takes to win the tournament, having been part of the side that won it 36 years ago by beating the Soviet Union in the final in Munich.

But this time his side have not had a convincing road to the semis, with the Dutch only advancing to the knockout stage of the tournament as one of the four lucky losers -- the teams finishing third in their group.

“As the Netherlands, we must be proud of our team. We have sometimes been criticised that other countries play more with their heart, but we have really shown a lion’s heart,” he insisted.

“We had to go very deep,” added captain Virgil van Dijk.

Substitute striker Wout Weghorst agreed. “We are close. This is a unique opportunity. We are going for it.”



EURO SEMIS	July 10, Wednesday 1:00 am SPAIN VS FRANCE	July 11, Thursday 1:00 am NETHERLANDS VS ENGLAND

The ‘Uruguayan style’ shines

REUTERS

Uruguay’s diligence and resilience under pressure after going a man down against Brazil in Saturday’s Copa America quarterfinal victory put the team’s distinctive character in the spotlight, coach Marcelo Bielsa said.

Uruguay lost Nahitan Nandez to a red card on a VAR review, which reduced their side to 10 men for the final stages of the second half, but they shut shop and defended resolutely to take the match to penalties where they prevailed 4-2.

“Everything that happens, happens in Uruguayan style, because the players are the ones that give their all to the team,” Bielsa told reporters.

“It was a match with very little goal opportunities, highly contested, very close, even with very little changes in possession. When we were one man down, we decided to dedicate ourselves to defending in our half.

“So holding on to that result as the Uruguayan team did shows the profile of Uruguayan football. And they were very calm in the penalty shootout that demands not only accuracy but also character.”

Bielsa’s teams are usually characterised by relentless attacking football and no team has scored more goals in the tournament than Uruguay, who netted nine times in the group stage.

But three straight clean sheets have also helped Uruguay book a semifinal against Colombia and Bielsa was quick to praise his squad’s mentality players.

rather than take credit for their defensive record.

“I am a bit more drawn to the offensive than the defensive game, but in a match that was as tight as this one, we created one more opportunity than our opponent and we defended well,” Bielsa added.



COPA AMERICA SEMIS
July 10, Wednesday, 6:00 am
ARGENTINA VS CANADA
July 11, Thursday, 6:00 am
URUGUAY VS COLOMBIA

Saifuddin paints Bangladesh cricket’s sorry picture

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

Bangladesh seamer Mohammad Saifuddin does not always make things easy for himself whenever he speaks to the media.

From re-assuring that he wanted to play as a batter in an edition of the Bangladesh Premier League to complaining about BCB not paying enough attention to him while he was in rehab, Saifuddin has a history of landing in hot water for his statements.

This time, however, he exposed the fragility of Bangladesh cricket’s dying pipeline by saying that the country hardly has 20-25 players capable of playing international cricket, meaning that there is a serious drought in the emergence of quality players.

Saifuddin, who trained for the first time in Mirpur yesterday since being left out of Bangladesh’s T20 World Cup squad earlier this year, also said that his fitness was key for a return to the national side.

“To be honest, there are 20-25 players in Bangladesh who are capable of playing

international cricket; there aren’t that many players,” Saifuddin told reporters on Sunday.

“Opportunities will come if I can stay fit. If you look at other countries, you’ll see that there is way more competition. I think the number of players who are of international standard is very low [in Bangladesh].”

Two major takeaways can be made from what Saifuddin said.

Naturally, the first one is that a current player is convinced about the fact that Bangladesh’s pipeline is drying up as evidenced by the lack of quality players coming through the ranks which is why the BCB as well as the team management often resort to players like Soumya Sarkar and Alif Hossain -- both of whom have done very little in recent times to warrant a place in a Bangladesh squad. BCB, under the leadership of Nazmul Hassan Papon, has always flaunted the idea of having a strong pipeline but its boasting in this regard has, time and again, been deflated when they go to major events and play relatively superior sides. Even the composition of the squads heading

to these events portrays the harsh reality of Bangladesh’s limited talent and a jeopardised future.

The second is a much more common loop in the country’s cricketing scenario which has established a culture of failure. The loop brings forth how a player who gets dropped from the national team can bank on another player to underperform in order to make a return. In most cases, the player who gets dropped has very little urgency to perform his way into the team and can bide his time for someone else to lose his spot to get back in contention.

Saifuddin’s case seems to be aligned with the latter as he may feel that the number of quality players in the pool is reasonable enough for him to make a comeback by dishing out average performances. The 27-year-old faltered when he had to compete with Tanzim Hasan Sakib in the Zimbabwe series before the team left for the USA for the T20 World Cup. Despite picking up more wickets than Sakib, he struggled to get his bearings right at the death in the final Zimbabwe T20I and that was enough for the selectors to axe him from the 17-member squad.

In an attempt to talk about a potential return to the national side and the general picture of Bangladesh cricket from his perspective, Saifuddin perhaps blurted out the reality of Bangladesh cricket and the mediocre mentality that a lot of players might harbour.

Neer wins chess championship with heavy heart

ANISUR RAHMAN

FIDE Master Manon Reja Neer, a 14-year-old chess prodigy, emerged as the undefeated champion in the 48th National Chess Championship yesterday ahead of three Grandmasters, but rather than being on cloud nine, the teenager was going through a whirlwind of emotions, still coming to terms with the sudden demise of his beloved ‘Zia sir’.

“I had nearly confirmed my championship win with two rounds in hand and was really happy about it. But now I am shocked and can’t find the words to express my emotions after the death of my beloved Zia sir,” Neer told The Daily Star yesterday.

Grandmaster Ziaur Rahman, who passed away on Friday after suffering a cardiac arrest during the 12th round match of the championship, had started coaching players in the last few years and Neer was one of his students.

Neer, who left for Sri Lanka yesterday to take part in two tournaments, emulated Zia with his championship win as the latter had also won his first title at 14 in 1988.

“Zia sir was my closest rival in the just-concluded championship, I was ahead by only one point. He probably would have been happy to see me to become champion as I had once trained



under him for 11 successive days, travelling from Narayanganj to his Mohammadpur resident,” said the ninth-grader, adding that he could never beat GM Zia.

The teenage chess prodigy has become the 16th player to win the national championship. With his triumph, the ninth-grader also emulated GM Zia, who had also won his first championship at the age of 14.

However, the record of the youngest national champion in chess still belongs to GM Niaz Murshed, who won it in 1979 at the age of 13.

Neer surprised everyone by securing 10 points in 13 matches including three draws against three GMs -- Niaz, Zia and Enamul Hossain Razib.

Neer feels his performance in the 21st Bangkok Chess Club Open in April, where he secured 6.5 points out of nine helped him to win the championship after three unsuccessful attempts.

“Since I started playing in the national championship, my target was to become champion. I think good performances in Thailand helped me a lot to play better,” said Neer, who earned his first International Master norm from the Bangkok Chess Club Open and secured the second IM norm from the just concluding national championship.

Asked about his future plan, Neer said, “My ultimate target is to become world champion which is hard but not impossible. The immediate target is to secure the IM title and then become the country’s sixth GM within next two years. For that, I need financial help, sponsorship and training,” said Neer who also thanked Bangladesh Cricket Board’s media committee chairman Tanvir Ahmed Titu for providing him air tickets to participate in tournaments overseas.