

Japan look to master chaotic Group F

AGENCIES

A guaranteed top-two finish is on the line as a calm and collected Japan face an unpredictable Sweden in their final Group F showdown on Friday. Sitting second in the pool with four points following a tactical draw with the Netherlands and a 4-0 thrashing of Tunisia, Hajime Moriyasu's side are zeroing in on stopping the lethal Swedish striking duo of Alexander Isak and Viktor Gyökeres.

While Japan have maintained defensive discipline, Graham Potter's porous Sweden have endured a wild ride, thumping Tunisia 5-1 before collapsing by the exact same scoreline against the Dutch.

Despite a vulnerable backline that has

contributed to conceding 19 goals since Potter took charge, the Swedes remain a potent threat up front, forcing Japanese defender Shogo Taniguchi to urge his backline to disrupt and crowd out the star forwards.

Meanwhile, the high-flying Netherlands look to cement top spot in the group when they face a hapless Tunisia side in total disarray in Kansas City. The Dutch top the standings on goals scored ahead of Japan, fresh off their five-goal destruction of Sweden.

Ronald Koeman may rotate his frontline due to minor knocks bothering Brian Brobbey and Memphis Depay, but they possess more than enough firepower for a Tunisian side that have leaked nine goals in two games.



PHOTO: X

KEY QUALIFICATION EQUATIONS

Netherlands (4 points)

A win or draw against bottom-placed Tunisia guarantees the Dutch automatic passage into the Round of 32. To lock down the top spot, they must match or better Japan's result, or maintain their slight edge on the total goals scored tiebreaker if both sides win.

Japan (4 points)

The Blue Samurai require just a single point against Sweden to lock in a top-two finish. A victory guarantees direct progression and puts them in the running for first place, depending on a goal-difference swing with the Netherlands.

Sweden (3 points)

The equation is clear for Potter's side: they must defeat Japan to jump over them into the top two and secure automatic qualification. A draw leaves them on four points, forcing them into a tense wait to see if they advance as a best third-placed wildcard team.

Tunisia (0 points)

The North Africans are already mathematically eliminated from the tournament after back-to-back heavy defeats. Renard's side are playing purely for pride, aiming to avoid a third consecutive blowout loss before packing their bags.

KEY QUALIFICATION EQUATIONS

United States (6 Pts)

Having already secured first place in Group D, the result against Turkey does not affect their progression. However, Pochettino's side is treating the match with knockout-level intensity, aiming for three straight wins for the first time in their history to avoid any complacency.

Australia (3 Pts)

The Socceroos are heavily positioned to advance as runners-up, relying on their three points and superior tiebreakers over the rest of the group. A win guarantees passage, while a draw likely

suffices.

Paraguay (3 Pts)

Level on points with Australia, Paraguay realistically needs a straight victory to secure a top-two finish. A draw leaves them entirely at the mercy of secondary group equations across the tournament.

Turkey (0 Pts)

Turkey eliminated cannot advance under any circumstances, but a victory or their first goal of the tournament would soften the blow of an early exit.

Ivory Coast chase runners-up slot while Curacao eye history

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Tiny Curacao had previously given themselves little chance against Ivory Coast at the World Cup, but a draw in their last group game with Ecuador might well have changed their perspective.

The smallest nation to compete at the finals were handed a 7-1 pasting by Germany on their tournament debut but then produced a dogged defensive display to take a point off Ecuador in

their second Group E fixture.

Before the tournament, veteran coach Dick Advocaat had sought to dampen expectations on the Caribbean island, and his casting of his squad as outsiders with only slim hopes of creating an upset seemed on the mark after the thrashing from the Germans.

But the goalless draw with Ecuador, who finished second in South American qualifying, offers hope of

another potential upset against the Ivorians, who will finish second in the group if they win.

Germany are already assured of top place, and the Ivorians are chasing the runners-up berth, which would put them on course to play either France or Norway in Dallas.

The Ivory Coast are making their fourth World Cup finals appearance but previously have never advanced past the opening group stage.

Australia and Paraguay battle for knockout spot

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The stage is set for an intriguing Group D finale. Having secured top spot with back-to-back wins, the USA face eliminated Turkey with the pressure entirely off.

Co-hosts manager Mauricio Pochettino is expected to heavily rotate his squad to protect players carrying yellow cards, while managing Christian Pulisic's minutes as the forward returns from a calf injury. Turkey, rooted to the bottom with zero points, play purely for pride to avoid heading home empty-handed.

Meanwhile, a straight knockout battle unfolds in Santa Clara between Australia and Paraguay, who sit level on three points. Tony Popovic's disciplined Australia hold the advantage with an even goal difference, needing only a draw to secure the runner-up spot.

Paraguay's minus-two goal difference, however, forces manager Gustavo Alfaro to abandon caution; anything less than a victory will leave the South Americans dependent on a wild-card berth.



PHOTO: REUTERS

KEY QUALIFICATION EQUATIONS

Germany (6 Pts)

Julian Nagelsmann's side have qualified as Group E winners and will now meet a third-placed team from Groups A, B, C, D or F in Boston on June 30.

Ivory Coast (3 Pts)

If Ivory Coast win or draw against Curacao, they will qualify as Group E runners-up. Emerse Fae's side will finish fourth and be eliminated if they lose to Curacao, and Ecuador beat Germany.

Ecuador (1 Pt)

If Ecuador beat Germany and Curacao defeat Ivory Coast, Ecuador will qualify as Group E runners-up. A draw or defeat against Germany will end Ecuador's journey in group stage this year. If Ecuador win against Germany and Ivory Coast defeat Curacao, they can still qualify as one of the best eight third-placed teams.

Curacao (1 Pt)

If Curacao beat Ivory Coast and Ecuador fail to defeat Germany, they will qualify as Group E runners-up.



DR Congo statue fan finally makes it to WC

AGENCIES

DR Congo's famous "living statue" finally made his FIFA World Cup debut on Wednesday.

Michel Nkuka Mboladinga, who gained fame during the Africa Cup of Nations for posing as a statue of DR Congo's assassinated independence leader Patrice Lumumba for the entirety of matches, attended his nation's fixture against Colombia. He had missed their opener against Portugal due to Ebola quarantine requirements.

"Lumumba Ve'a", as the sharply dressed supporter is known for his resemblance to the slain leader, took his spot about an hour before kick-off at Estadio Akron. Dressed in a bright red jacket and tie, a yellow shirt, and blue trousers, he stood motionless on

a pedestal behind the DR Congo bench with his right arm raised as the game began.

Nkuka Mboladinga became a social media sensation during the continental tournament for his ability to remain completely still on his pedestal throughout the 90 minutes.

His inspiration, Lumumba, was an activist who helped end Belgian colonial rule over DR Congo in 1960. He was assassinated within a year during a struggle against a Belgian-backed secessionist movement in the mineral-rich Katanga region.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Bangladesh face India in T20 WC survival battle

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will take on India in Manchester on Thursday, knowing that only a win will suffice to keep their Women's T20 World Cup semi-final hopes alive, while India also require a victory to remain in the hunt for a last-four spot.

Three teams are currently vying for the second qualifying position in Group 1, with India, South Africa, and Bangladesh sitting second, third, and fourth in the standings respectively, all level on four points. Australia lead the group comfortably with eight points.

Bangladesh batter Sobhana Mostary insisted that they will push India all the way, drawing confidence from their recent home bilateral series against their neighbours.

"India are a strong side, but when we played them in our home bilateral series, we competed well," Mostary said at the press conference yesterday.

"We always try our hardest to push them, and after the win against Pakistan, the team is in a good mental space. So, I feel we just want to play to our strengths."

India possess a far superior net run-rate compared to South Africa and Bangladesh, meaning Nigar Sultana's side will not only need to win their remaining two matches but do so by considerable margins.

"We are focusing on our batting because the conditions are quite different here. We have to adapt quickly, given that our batting crumbled in two of the matches," she concluded.

The match is scheduled to start at 7:30 pm Bangladesh Time.