

France favourites, Sweden believers

AGENCIES

Sweden have embraced their underdog status ahead of Tuesday's World Cup Round of 32 clash with France in New Jersey, insisting the pressure rests firmly on the 2018 champions.

Few expect Graham Potter's side to upset one of the tournament favourites, but that has done little to dent confidence in the Swedish camp.

"I don't think so much about whether we're favourites or not," midfielder Daniel Svensson told SVT. "We're going to do what we've worked on all year. If we do that, we have a great chance to beat them."

"They're one of the favourites to win the whole thing, so of course they're favourites. They are my favourites."

Sweden trained on Sunday, including practising penalties, as they prepared for a contest likely to see them defend in a compact low block before looking to strike France on the counter.

That approach will rely heavily on the firepower of Viktor Gyokeres and Alexander Isak, both capable of troubling any defence in the tournament.

The Swedes then thrashed Tunisia 5-1, suffered a 5-1 defeat to the Netherlands and scraped into the knockout stage with a 1-1 draw against Japan to finish third in their group.

Assistant coach Sebastian Larsson, who scored in Sweden's 2-0 victory over France at Euro 2012, believes another upset is possible.

"If you look back, we've managed to knock out bigger teams before," Larsson said. "Even though it's France, there's reason to believe."



PHOTO: INSTAGRAM/REUTERS

- This will be the 24th meeting between France and Sweden in all competitions. France have won 12, Sweden six, with five draws.
- It will be only their third meeting at a major tournament and their first at a World Cup. Sweden won the last such encounter 2-0 at Euro 2012 after the sides drew 1-1 at Euro 1992.
- France have won each of their last six

World Cup matches against European opposition. No team has ever won seven in a row against UEFA nations at the tournament.

- France won all three group matches at a major tournament for the first time since lifting the 1998 World Cup on home soil.
- Les Bleus have scored at least three goals in each of their last four World Cup matches. No team has ever done so in five consecutive games.

- Kylian Mbappe and Ousmane Dembele have four World Cup goals each at this tournament. They have combined for five World Cup goals since 2022 - Mbappe has assisted Dembele twice, while Dembele has set up Mbappe three times. Their five goal combinations are the joint most by any duo at the World Cup since 1966, alongside Poland's Andrzej Szarmach and Grzegorz Lato, and Germany's Miroslav Klose and



"The first competition is finished. But there is a second. For those of you who have already played in a World Cup, that's where everything changes. It's the same competition but it's another competition. Every game can be your last after every match."

France coach **Didier Deschamps**

Hopefully the players feel the same way."

"I hope they don't look forward to meeting us. But if they do, that's just how it is. We still have players who can deliver very good things. For us it's about getting everything right."

Michael Ballack.

- Sweden have already scored a record seven goals in a single World Cup group stage.
- Viktor Gyokeres attempted more shots (11) and created more chances (8) than any other Sweden player during the group stage.
- Anthony Elanga has scored in each of Sweden's last two group-stage matches, against the Netherlands and Japan.

Eustaquio's moment of destiny

AGENCIES

As the ball rocketed into the net in the stoppage time, Stephen Eustaquio spread his arms wide and soaked in the deafening roar from the Canadian supporters behind the goal. In a match drifting toward extra time, Eustaquio delivered the decisive blow, scoring a dramatic 92nd-minute winner against South Africa to secure his country's first-ever FIFA World Cup knockout victory.

For many, it was a moment of sporting heroism. For Eustaquio, it was something far more personal.

The 29-year-old midfielder had carried much more than expectations into the FIFA World Cup 2026. Behind his composed presence and tireless performances lies a story shaped by sacrifice, resilience and profound loss. Having lost his mother in April 2023 and his father in May 2024, Eustaquio has spent the last few years navigating grief while continuing to lead Canada on football's biggest stage.

On Sunday night at Los Angeles Stadium, that journey found its defining moment.

With South Africa sitting deep and frustrating Canada's attacks, the contest appeared destined for extra time. But Eustaquio refused to let belief fade. Receiving the ball outside the area, he struck a fierce half-volley that flew into the back of the net, sending the stadium into celebration and earning him the player of the match award.

"We worked a lot to get this victory. We really wanted to give this win to all the Canadians," Eustaquio said after the game.

Born in Leamington, Ontario, to Portuguese parents, football was almost a birthright for Eustaquio. He began playing at the age of four



PHOTO: REUTERS

before moving with his family to Portugal, where he continued his development. His career later took him from Leixoes and Chaves to Cruz Azul in Mexico, Pacos de Ferreira, Porto and eventually Los Angeles FC.

Yet despite the clubs, the transfers and the growing reputation, the emotional burden he carried remained immense.

Canada coach Jesse Marsch believes few players deserved such a moment more.

"I couldn't think of a more deserving human being in a group of incredible human beings," Marsch said. "From somewhere his parents are looking down, and they saw that."

Eustaquio has become one of Canada's

most dependable figures, embodying the calmness and leadership Marsch has tried to instill within the squad. His winning strike was not merely an act of technical brilliance but a testament to perseverance through pain.

Canada now look ahead to a last-16 clash against either Morocco or the Netherlands, but for Eustaquio, the journey remains unfinished. "I'm over the moon," he said. "But the job's not finished."

For one unforgettable night in Los Angeles, however, Eustaquio gave Canadians a memory to cherish -- and perhaps delivered a tribute worthy of the parents who helped shape the man behind the hero.

Taijul shines but Zimbabwe in the driver's seat

SPORTS REPORTER

Taijul Islam once again emerged as Bangladesh's lone bright spot, claiming the third-best figures of his Test career with a seven-wicket haul in Harare on yesterday. But his heroics were overshadowed by another underwhelming performance from the Tigers as Zimbabwe piled up 410 in their first innings to take a commanding 270-run lead.

Having collapsed for just 140 on Day 1, Bangladesh had pinned their hopes on a pace attack comprising Hasan Mahmud, Khaled Ahmed and returning seamer Ebadot Hossain to exploit the lively conditions. Instead, Zimbabwe's batters dictated proceedings throughout the second day.

Resuming on 76 without loss, Zimbabwe were led by Innocent Kaia, who struck his maiden Test century with a composed 140, punishing anything overpitched or short. Khaled, the most effective of Bangladesh's seamers, provided the early breakthrough when Brendon Taylor edged behind for 17.

Hasan and Ebadot produced occasional threatening deliveries but struggled for consistency, repeatedly releasing the pressure with loose lines and lengths. Hasan returned figures of 0 for 102, while Ebadot conceded 96 runs without a wicket at an economy rate of 4.80.

It was Taijul who finally wrestled back

some control. The left-arm spinner broke the 107-run fourth-wicket stand by dismissing Brian Bennett for 59 with a sharp caught-and-bowled chance before luring Kaia into a top-edge shortly after he reached 140.

Taijul then ran through the lower order to finish with 7-138, his 19th five-wicket haul in Tests, drawing level with Shakib Al Hasan for the most Test filers by a Bangladesh bowler. His spell also became the best bowling figures by a Bangladeshi in an away Test, surpassing Shakib's 6-33 against the West Indies in Kingston.



PHOTO: ZIMBABWE CRICKET

Wesley Madhevere remained unbeaten on 77 as Zimbabwe were eventually dismissed for 410.

In response, Bangladesh lost Shadman Islam fell for nine before Mahmudul Hasan Joy and Momintul Haque guided the visitors to 40-1 at Stumps.

With three days remaining, Bangladesh still trail by 230 runs and face a daunting task to save the Test.

THE MAN WHO REFUSED TO LOSE

STAR SPORTS DESK

Ben Stokes was cricket's ultimate clutch performer, a rare breed of all-rounder who treated a crumbling fifth-day minefield or a lost-cause run chase not as a crisis, but as his rightful stage. From standing tall against peak Mitchell Johnson at a cracked WACA to engineering modern white-ball miracles, Stokes played with a raw grit that redefined English

cricket's resilience. As a leader, he tore up the traditional Test playbook, injecting an infectious, fearless belief that transformed a conservative sport. He was a titanic character who led from the front, leaving the game transformed, and entirely on his own terms.

STOKES' CAREER THROUGH THE YEARS

2013 - Perth breakthrough: Stokes' 2013-14 Ashes century in Perth was a rare highlight on a tour to forget, showcasing his pugnacity.

2016 - Cape Town masterpiece: Stokes' 258 in Cape Town in 2016 was historic - the second-fastest of all time - and underlined his brutal hitting power. It remains his highest Test score.

2016 - T20 World Cup final heartbreak: He was handed the ball for the last over of the 2016 T20 World Cup final, with the West Indies needing 19 runs to win from 6

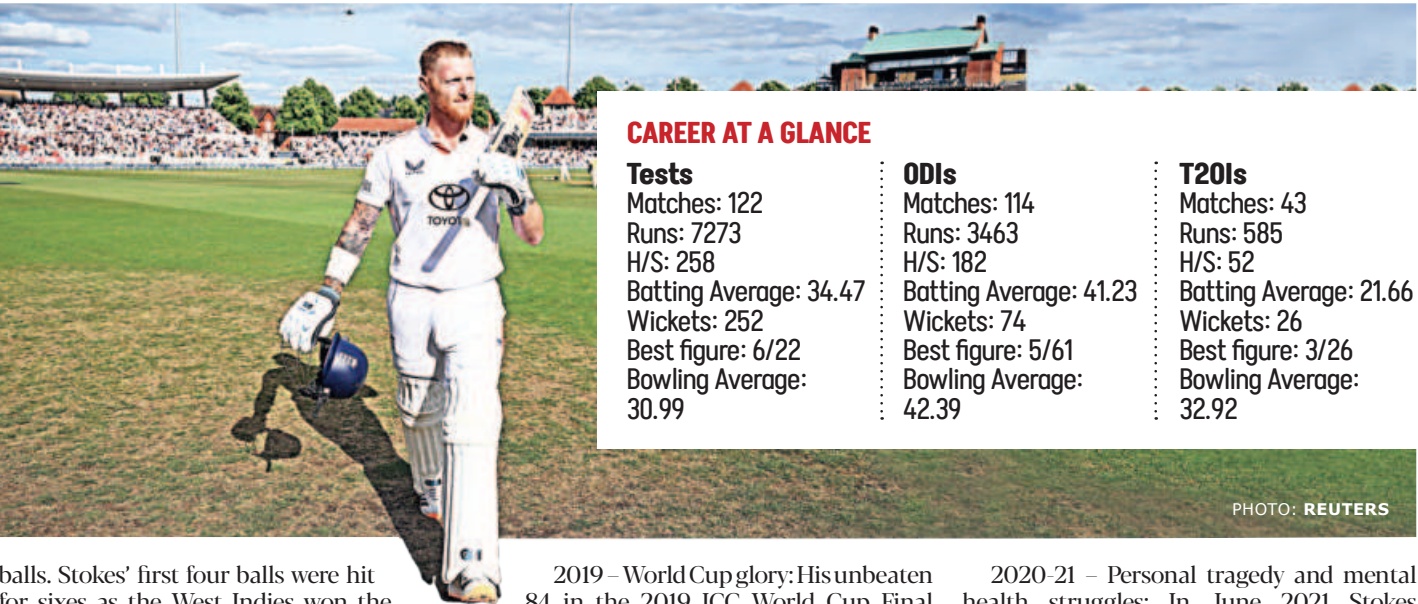


PHOTO: REUTERS

CAREER AT A GLANCE

Tests	ODIs	T20Is
Matches: 122	Matches: 114	Matches: 43
Runs: 7273	Runs: 3463	Runs: 585
H/S: 258	H/S: 182	H/S: 52
Batting Average: 34.47	Batting Average: 41.23	Batting Average: 21.66
Wickets: 252	Wickets: 74	Wickets: 26
Best figure: 6/22	Best figure: 5/61	Best figure: 3/26
Bowling Average: 30.99	Bowling Average: 42.39	Bowling Average: 32.92

balls. Stokes' first four balls were hit for sixes as the West Indies won the championship.

2017 - The Bristol nightclub incident: In September 2017 Stokes was arrested after a street brawl outside a nightclub in Bristol and charged with affray. He was dropped from the squad for the 2017-18 Australia tour, a series in which he had been expected to play a key role, and removed as England's vice captain.

2019 - World Cup glory: His unbeaten 84 in the 2019 ICC World Cup Final helped take the match against New Zealand to a Super Over in which England triumphed, with Stokes winning the Man of the Match award.

2019 - Headingley miracle: Weeks later his sensational 135 not out at Headingley dragged England from the brink of defeat to victory in the third Ashes Test in one of the team's greatest wins.

2020-21 - Personal tragedy and mental health struggles: In June 2021 Stokes announced an indefinite break from cricket to focus on his 'mental wellbeing'. He later stated that the combination of feeling let down over the ECB's handling of the Bristol nightclub incident, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the death of his father Ged Stokes had led him to suffer from anxiety and panic attacks.

2022 - Test captaincy and "Bazball":

Stokes, long-time deputy to Joe Root, was appointed as his successor. Alongside new coach Brendon McCullum, he ushered in a new era of hyper-aggressive red-ball cricket, dubbed "Bazball" by the press.

2024 - Fastest Test fifty by an Englishman: Opening the batting in the second innings of the 3rd test against the West Indies at Edgbaston on 28 July, Stokes scored the fastest test half-century by an English player, reaching his 50 off just 24 balls, surpassing Ian Botham's record set in 1981 by four deliveries.

- Stokes retires as the most explosive baseline hitter in the history of long-form cricket, holding the all-time world record for the most sixes in Test history (138), having famously broken the previous record held by his own coach, Brendon McCullum.

- He finishes with 7,273 Test runs and 252 wickets, cementing his spot as only the second player in history to hit the 7,000-run / 250-wicket double alongside Jacques Kallis.

- In a historic innings against South Africa in 2016, Stokes shattered three world records simultaneously: he smashed the highest Test score by a number six batsman (258), blasted the fastest 250 in Test history (off 196 balls), and anchored the highest sixth-wicket partnership ever recorded (399 runs) with Jonny Bairstow.