



Spain's 'leader' Luis Enrique out to settle old scores with Italy

LONDON: Luis Enrique's belligerent self-belief has led Spain to the semi-finals of Euro 2020, but the former Barcelona boss has another personal score to settle in tonight's last four against Italy. His playing career at major tournaments is best remembered for the vicious elbow from Mauro Tassotti that left blood flowing from his burst nose over his white Spain shirt at the 1994 World Cup.



SAINT PETERSBURG: Spain's coach Luis Enrique gestures during the Euro 2020 quarter-final football match between Switzerland and Spain at the Saint Petersburg Stadium in Saint Petersburg on July 2, 2021. — AFP

Tassotti escaped without punishment at the time - Spain denied a stoppage time penalty and the chance to take the game to extra-time as the Azzurri ran out 2-1 winners. The Italy defender was subsequently banned for eight games by FIFA, but the damage was already done for Spain as they exited at the quarter-finals.

That was a familiar story for Spanish football at the time as generations of talented players came and went without leaving a trace at major competitions. All that changed in 2008 as a last eight win over Italy on penalties opened the door for Luis Aragones's side to win the European Championship.

Vicente del Bosque then took over to win the 2010 World Cup and Euro 2012. But by the time Luis Enrique got the call, Spain had fallen rapidly from grace. In the previous three major tournaments, they failed to even reach the quarter-finals as the generation of a glorious era grew old together.

Luis Enrique's contentious call to leave out former captain Sergio Ramos for Euro 2020 broke the last remaining link to the 2008 team. Without Ramos, or any other Real Madrid player for the first time in Spain's history at a major tournament, the Madrid press cried foul, claiming La Furia Roja would lack leadership. "I am one of the leaders, like all coaches," said Luis Enrique in response. "If that is not the case, it is a bad signal."

Big calls come good

It has not been a totally smooth ride. A case of coronavirus for Sergio Busquets in the days before the tournament began meant the coach's decision not to take his full complement of 26 players was further

questioned. Spain have also only won one of their five games in 90 minutes. Yet, a number of Luis Enrique's biggest calls have come through for him when it mattered most.

Alvaro Morata had to listen to his own fans chant "how bad are you" in a pre-tournament friendly against Portugal. After a host of missed chances, including a penalty, in the group stages, the Juventus striker produced a stunning finish in extra-time to turn the last 16 tie against Croatia back in his side's favor. Unai Simon's comical own goal in that game to open the scoring when he failed to control a simple back pass from Pedri reopened the debate over who should be Spain's number one.

But the Athletic Bilbao goalkeeper made two penalty saves in the shootout win over Switzerland in the quarter-finals. Nationalized just weeks before Euro 2020 kicked off, center-back Aymeric Laporte has made vital contributions in both boxes as has Cesar Azpilicueta on his international recall after three years.

Further forward, Paris Saint-Germain winger Pablo Sarabia has more than justified his surprise place in the squad with goals against Slovakia and Croatia, while Ferran Torres, Dani Olmo and Mikel Oyarzabal have all made telling contributions when introduced as substitutes.

"I always said we were one of the eight candidates to win the European Championship and now we are among the four best," said Luis Enrique. "It would be ridiculous to be in the semi-finals and not think about taking one step more. This is the objective." A familiar foe stands in his way at Wembley, but win or lose, Luis Enrique will do it his own way. — AFP



BURTON-ON-TRENT: England's coach Gareth Southgate attends an England training session at St George's Park in Burton-on-Trent, central England, yesterday. — AFP

England ready to end semi-final jinx at Euro 2020: Southgate

LONDON: Gareth Southgate says England are ready to end their semi-final hoodoo as they prepare to face Denmark in the last four of Euro 2020, bidding to reach their first final at a major tournament since 1966. England topped their group and beat old foes Germany in the round of 16 before ratcheting up expectations with Saturday's thumping 4-0 quarter-final win against Ukraine in Rome.

England have fallen at the penultimate hurdle at major tournaments on four occasions since winning the World Cup in 1966, including their defeat by Croatia at the World Cup in Russia three years ago. But Southgate believes his side have learned from that disappointment and are ready to take the next step.

"We've knocked off so many hoodoos or perceived barriers already and I feel like this group of players will feel this is just the next challenge," he said. "I guess the interesting part for us is we won't feel totally satisfied if it's just a semi-final for us, whereas maybe three years ago, although there was massive disappointment after the semi-final, there was a feeling we'd come a long way. Now we've replicated what we did there, but that won't be enough to fulfill the group. That's a positive sign."

A key difference from 2018 is heightened expectation, with Southgate himself admitting their benchmark in Russia was to end England's 12-year wait for a knockout victory. The former international defender now has more knockout wins than any previous England manager and will go looking for another in tomorrow's semi-final bolstered by a boisterous partisan crowd of 60,000-plus at Wembley.

"It's great to be coming back now," said Southgate, who expects teenager Bukayo Saka to return to training on Monday after missing the Ukraine match with a slight knock. "To go and have that different environment, preparation, focus was definitely helpful. But now to be coming back to Wembley is a great thing for us."

Southgate says going through "real-life experiences together" such as the sickening racism experienced in Montenegro and Bulgaria in Euro 2020 qualifiers has helped create a bond among his players. Semi-final opponents Denmark have also been brought closer together following Christian Eriksen's cardiac arrest in their group opener. The Inter Milan player needed resuscitation on the pitch before a successful operation in hospital.

"We talk about perspective in sport but we rarely have it," Southgate said. "This was a moment that brought it home for all of us. I can also imagine what it has done for the Danish team, their bond. We are talking about the things we have been through but what they went through that day — the way their captain was and the way the group was — and how that would have connected with their supporters. That's pretty powerful." — AFP

Peter Schmeichel backs son Kasper to thrive at Euro

LONDON: Peter Schmeichel says son Kasper will be ready for penalties if needed when Denmark take on England in the Euro 2020 semi-finals tomorrow, warning the Danes should not be underestimated. The former Manchester United goalkeeper was part of the Danish team that stunned the world in 1992 when they won the European Championship for the first and only time after receiving a late call-up to the tournament when the former Yugoslavia were disqualified. Schmeichel senior kept a clean sheet against England in a Group One stalemate but more crucially was able to deny Marco van Basten from the spot in a 5-4 penalty shoot-out success over the Netherlands in the last four before he shut out Germany in the final to help his country claim silverware.

"I am sure he would feel the same as I did — that it is yet another challenge," the 57-year-old told ITV when asked how Leicester goalkeeper Kasper would feel about penalties. "You have to deal with that and it is part of the job you've chosen to do. You know how significant it is and how big it is but at the end of the day you can only do so much as a goalkeeper and he will be prepared for it. I think one thing he will think of is the last time Denmark was in the European Championship semi-finals, Denmark did win on penalties so he can bring that into it."

England are favorites to progress at Wembley tomorrow and reach a first-ever European Championship final but Schmeichel warned Gareth Southgate's side not to underestimate Denmark, who have recovered from the trauma of Christian Eriksen's on-pitch cardiac arrest to reach the last four. "You have to realize you are playing a good team when you reach the semi-final," he said. "Any team you play will be a quality team, there is no doubt about that. We could have played Italy or Spain, they are equally as strong but I think what we have proven in our campaign is that we are a strong team as well and we can be a danger to anyone." — AFP



MUNICH: Belgium's midfielder Kevin De Bruyne (left) battles with Italy's midfielder Jorginho during the Euro 2020 quarter-final football match between Belgium and Italy at the Allianz Arena in Munich on July 2, 2021. — AFP

Brazil-born Jorginho, Italy's beating heart at Euro 2020

MILAN: A discreet but 'irreplaceable' midfield presence Jorginho has been the cornerstone of Italy's revival from World Cup flops to Euro 2020 contenders with a semi-final against Spain awaiting in the London of his club side Chelsea on tonight.

One of the Azzurri's Brazilian contingent along with domestic teammate Emerson Palmieri and Atalanta defender Rafael Toli, Jorginho, born in the southern town of Imbituba, has brought the technical flair of the country of his birth to his adopted Italy. "With Jorginho, everything seems simple. He is essential to this team, untouchable," said midfield partner Marco Verratti.

"Jorginho and Verratti are two phenomena and make the team turn," continued Inter Milan midfielder

Nicolo Barella, who scored the opener in a 2-1 win over favorites Belgium which fired Italy into the final four. "This midfield, together with that of (Serie A champions) Inter Milan, is among the strongest I've ever played in. Between us we create rivalries that push each other to do better and win," Barella added.

Against the three-time European champions it will be another battle as Italy look to push their unbeaten run to 33 consecutive matches and move within one step of a title they last won in 1968. "With Spain it will be a difficult game, we are two similar teams who both want to play the ball," continued Barella.

Left-back Leonardo Spinazzola, another of the motors behind Italy's Euro 2020 run, will be out after rupturing his Achilles tendon against the Red Devils. Santos-native Emerson, another Champions League winner with the Blues, will likely step into that role this week.

Jorginho qualifies for the Azzurri thanks to his grandfather who hails from the northern region of Vicenza. "I feel that I've got the Brazilian technique with the ball, but the Italian mentality to always train hard and win," said Jorginho. — AFP

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