

Sports

Sweden end German hoodoo to set up WCup s-final clash with Netherlands

Germans deprived of the chance to defend their Olympic title

PARIS: Stina Blackstenius scored the winner as Sweden came from behind to stun old rivals Germany on Saturday and set up a women's World Cup semi-final against the Netherlands, who reached the last four for the first time.

Sweden had not beaten Germany at a major women's tournament since the 1995 World Cup, failing to win any of their subsequent meetings at World Cups, European Championships and Olympics in almost quarter of a century.

That run included defeats in the 2003 World Cup final and the gold medal match at the 2016 Rio Olympics, but they gained revenge in Rennes, coming from behind to win their quarter-final 2-1.

Lina Magull had given Germany a 16th-minute lead with a fine finish from a Sara Dacbritz assist, but the excellent Sofia Jakobsson equalised soon after on a hot evening in Brittany. The winner arrived three minutes after half-time, with Blackstenius prodding home the rebound after Almuth Schult had saved a Fridolina Rolfö header.

Despite bringing on star player Dszenifer Marozsan, who had missed the previous three games with a broken toe, Germany remained blunt as the clock ticked down. Blackstenius had scored Sweden's winner against Canada in the last round and also netted against the Germans in that Olympic final defeat in 2016.

"We have talked about the possibilities here for us to go far and win every game," said a bullish Sweden coach Peter Gerhardsson. "There's not a single mitochondria in us that's content. We're going to go for it."

The Germans will now be deprived of the chance to defend their Olympic title, with defeat here meaning they fail to qualify for the 2020 Tokyo Games. Sweden

will join the Netherlands and Great Britain—who have qualified thanks to England's World Cup run-at the Games instead.

"We are now qualified for the Olympics. That is one thing that has been hanging over our heads for a while," said Gerhardsson. Germany coach Martina Voss-Tecklenburg told ARD: "The defeat hurts, but we are in a process. We will grow from this experience."

Sweden go on to a semi-final encounter with the Dutch in Lyon on Wednesday, and they will have a score to settle there too, having lost to the Netherlands at Euro 2017. The 'Oranje' went on to win that tournament and have coped well in France with their status as reigning European champions.

On Saturday they sank Italy 2-0 in Valenciennes as headed goals from Vivianne Miedema and Stefanie van der Gragt in the second half taking them through to their first ever World Cup semi-final in just their second appearance at the tournament.

"I am very proud of the team. We have very good players. Since our victory at Euro 2017 we have gained a lot of confidence and we have improved enough to do well at this World Cup," said Dutch coach Sarina Wiegman. She said qualifying for the Olympics was "a dream come true".

Miedema's goal means the Arsenal striker—her country's record goal-scorer—now has 61 in 80 international matches. Surprise quarter-finalists Italy wilted towards the finish on a hot day and their players were in tears at the end.

"We are really upset because we got this far and had the chance to qualify for the Olympics. That's what we dreamed of," said Barbara Bonansea. "No-one expected all this from us so we can't be anything but happy."



RENNES: Sweden's goalkeeper Hedvig Lindahl (R) vies with Germany's midfielder Alexandra Popp (C) during the France 2019 Women's World Cup quarter-final football match between Germany and Sweden, at the Roazhon park stadium in Rennes. —AFP

The tournament now switches for the closing stages to Lyon—home to Europe's top women's club side—with holders the United States and England facing off in the first semi-final on Tuesday. Megan Rapinoe's double strike gave the USA a 2-1 win over

France on Friday, ending the hosts' dream of winning the trophy on home soil.

England reached their second successive World Cup semi-final with a straightforward 3-0 win over Norway on Thursday. —AFP

Peru beat Uruguay to reach Copa semi finals

SALVADOR: Goalkeeper Pedro Gallese saved Luis Suarez's spot-kick as Peru beat Uruguay on penalties on Saturday to reach the Copa America semi-finals, where they will face Chile. Edison Flores scored the decisive penalty as Peru, who were thrashed 5-0 by Brazil in their previous match, qualified for the semi-finals for the third time in the last four editions of the Copa.

It was a remarkable turnaround for Gallese, who was the villain of that thumping by the hosts, gifting Brazil their second goal by clearing the ball straight to Roberto Firmino, while he was also partially at fault for the first and third scores.

But in Salvador he guessed the right way for the first shoot-out penalty to deny Barcelona forward Suarez, after which Peru's own penalty-takers were faultless. "I'm very proud of our team. I can't really put it into words," said Peru captain Paolo Guerrero.

"A lot of people said we don't have the fortitude and guts. But we showed today on the pitch that we could take them on head-on. 'Peru has hunger, Peru is a warrior, Peru has guts.' It was the third Copa quarter-final to finish goalless and head to penalties after Uruguay had three goals ruled out for offside during normal time.

Giorgian de Arrascaeta, Edinson Cavani and Suarez had all put the ball in the net, only to be denied by a linesman's flag. "It's a bitter and sad feeling. We had high hopes to qualify, but simply couldn't," said Uruguay's captain Diego Godin.

"We lacked a goal. We tried, we looked for it... (But) three were disallowed." Brazil beat Paraguay on spot-kicks on Thursday and champions Chile did likewise to knock-out Colombia on Friday. In the only match to feature any goals, Argentina defeated Venezuela 2-0 on Friday.

Peru will face Chile in the second semi-final in Porto Alegre on Wednesday, a day after hosts Brazil take on Argentina in Belo Horizonte. Copa winners in 1939 and 1975, Peru lost to Chile in the semi-finals four years ago.

After a slow opening, Uruguay burst into life on 15 minutes when Federico Valverde surged onto a loose Peru pass in their own half and picked out an unmarked Luis Suarez on the penalty spot, but the Barcelona forward couldn't



SALVADOR: Peru's Andre Carrillo (front) and Uruguay's Rodrigo Bentancur vie for the ball during their Copa America quarterfinal football match at the Fonte Nova Arena in Salvador, Brazil. —AFP

keep down his header.

Two minutes later Nahitan Nandez broke into the box from the flank but his shot was blocked by a sliding defender. In pouring rain, Uruguay looked set to take the lead on 24 minutes with a rapier counter-attack, but Cavani ballooned the ball into the sky from six yards after Gallese parried Suarez's shot, although it wouldn't have counted as the Barcelona forward was retroactively deemed offside

when he received the ball.

Moments later Nandez headed over from six yards. De Arrascaeta had the ball in the net on 28 minutes but that was chalked off for an offside against Nandez. Peru finally created a worthy chance late in the first half but Jose Gimenez made a stunning recovery tackle to deny Guerrero a goalscoring chance. Up the other end, Gallese made himself big to block Cavani's shot on the turn. —AFP

Renard expects 'tough game' against S Africa

CAIRO: Morocco coach Herve Renard is anticipating a "tough game" against South Africa today at the Africa Cup of Nations in Egypt despite the contrasting fortunes of the teams. While Morocco were deserved 1-0 winners over the Ivory Coast in Group D—considered the hardest of the six—South Africa were lucky to lose only 1-0 to the west Africans.

"South Africa have a lot of very good players," said Renard, the only coach to win the African title with two countries. "They also have a good coach in Stuart Baxter so it will be a tough game." Here, AFP Sport previews the final Group C and Group D matches in Cairo with Morocco and Algeria already assured of last-16 places.

MOROCCO V SOUTH AFRICA

Although Morocco won by only one-goal margins against Namibia and the Ivory Coast, they have exhibited class and appear to be keeping plenty in reserve for the knockout phase. The goal that sunk the Ivorians demonstrated why the Atlas Lions are considered one of the biggest threats to hosts and bookmakers' favourites Egypt. Nordin Amrabat displayed dribbling skills rarely seen in this tournament and his clever pass freed scorer Youssef En-Nesyri, who had timed his dart forward perfectly. South Africa have been poor both when losing to the Ivory Coast and scraping a win over Namibia with Baxter lamenting the "slowness of transitions from defence to attack".

IVORY COAST V NAMIBIA

After outplaying South Africa, the Ivorians came off second best against Morocco, but should recover to defeat spirited but limited Namibia and

secure a last-16 place. It will concern coach Ibrahim Kamara, though, that with so many talented forwards like Nicolas Pepe at his disposal the Elephants have managed just one goal in 180 minutes. Against South Africa, Kamara could afford the luxury of keeping Crystal Palace flier Wilfried Zaha on the bench until late in the second half. Namibia are craving a first Cup of Nations win after eight failed attempts, including a 4-3 loss to the Ivory Coast in Burkina Faso 21 years ago.

ALGERIA V TANZANIA

Happy Algeria face depressed Tanzania in a Group C match the north Africans will expect to win and maintain a perfect record at the tournament. Coach Djamel Belmadi has been hailed after victories over Kenya and Senegal, whose line-up included Liverpool star Sadio Mane and Napoli centre-back Kalidou Koulibaly. "Our preparations included time in Qatar getting used to intense heat," said veteran midfielder Sofiane Feghouli, referring to temperatures that have reached 38 Celsius (100 Fahrenheit) in Egypt. Tanzania were the first country to be eliminated after losses to Senegal and Kenya and coach Emmanuel Amunike admitted that "we lack experience and there is no character in the team".

KENYA V SENEGAL

Senegal coach and former star Aliou Cisse is expecting a big improvement from Mane and his team-mates against Kenya after they were out-fought by Algeria. "Of course Sadio Mane can do better," he said of the Anfield hero who missed the opening win over Tanzania due to a suspension after being yellow-carded twice in qualifiers. Cisse said there was a silver lining to the defeat by Algeria: "We are no longer being called the favourites. The favourites are those who have won the tournament before." Outplayed by Algeria, Kenya came from behind twice to edge east African neighbours Tanzania and raise hopes of a possible last-16 slot as one of the best four third-place teams. —AFP

Argentina waiting for Messi magic to make an appearance

BELO HORIZONTE: For the last dozen years, Argentina has been waiting for global superstar Lionel Messi to lead their football team to a major international trophy. But when the country needed the five-time Ballon d'Or winner most, Messi failed to emulate the feats of Diego Maradona in 1986 — when for some he almost single-handedly won the World Cup.

Four times Messi has lined up with Argentina in a major final—the 2014 World Cup and Copa America in 2007, 2015 and 2016 — but every time they have lost. He has often come under criticism for failing to reproduce his Barcelona form when wearing the sky blue and white jersey of the national team.

Now, ahead of a mouth-watering Copa semi-final against hosts Brazil in Belo Horizonte, Argentines are simply waiting for Messi to turn up. "This is the match for Messi to appear," screamed Ole newspaper's online edition after Argentina beat Venezuela 2-0 to secure the Brazil semi-final.

Ironically, at this tournament, while Argentina's performances have been improving steadily, Messi has, if anything, become less influential. Argentina were all at sea in their opening 2-0 defeat to Colombia and needed a Messi penalty to salvage a 1-1 draw with Paraguay.

But in the 2-0 win over Qatar that qualified Argentina for the knock-out rounds, and the quarter-final victory over Venezuela by the same score, Messi became an increasingly peripheral figure.

He admitted as much after the Venezuela match, saying: "I'm not at my best level, I'm not playing how I hoped I would. I'm not having my best Copa America." Brazil center-back Thiago Silva is not so convinced, though.

"For me, Messi is the best player in history, the best I've ever seen play. It's a privilege to play against him," said a player who hails from the country that produced Pele, Garincha, Socrates, Ronaldo and Ronaldinho.

Messi turned 32 during the tournament and while he doesn't appear close to retirement, it cannot be too many years away. His game has changed over the years and he no longer produces the same kind of, or quantity of, darting runs at the heart of opposition defences.

He plays deeper than he used to, passes more and is more selective with his runs. He also rests more than he used to and took an eight-month break from the national team following the World Cup in Russia, only returning in March in a 3-1 friendly defeat to Venezuela.

But he is more than just the star of the team these days, he is the leader and captains both club and country. During the club season, Messi took the lead in defending Philippe Coutinho, whom he will line up opposite on Tuesday, from criticism levelled at the Brazilian playmaker in the Catalan press.

Messi also defended Barcelona boss Ernesto Valverde against the brickbats. And here, while his and Argentina's attacking performances have been nothing to enthuse about, Messi took the time to praise the team's defensive efforts.

"Defensively we didn't have any problems and the team was very solid at all times," he said following the Venezuela victory, which he described as a "complete" performance. —AFP

Points proven, World Cup heads into grand finale

LYON: Television audience records have been smashed, global media coverage has been unprecedented and the quality of football has won over many sceptics—now the women's World Cup heads into its final week, the business end of the tournament.

The United States, the defending champions and three-times World Cup winners, remain favourites to lift the trophy in Lyon on Sunday but first they must deal with a confident England side tomorrow's semi-final.

In Wednesday's game, European champions the Netherlands take on a Sweden side who are on a high after upsetting Olympic champions Germany in Saturday's quarter-final. Today, fans of all four teams began to arrive in Lyon, bringing their colour and bonhomie to the central French city. The Dutch turned Valenciennes orange on Saturday, while thousands of Americans had poured into Paris for Friday's win over the hosts. England have had unprecedented levels of travelling support and Sweden's status as one of the pioneer nations in women's football means they never lack for backing.

What fills veterans of the women's game with such confidence for the future is the sight of so many young female supporters in the crowds, school-age players who idolise the international footballers. There is a family atmosphere but also a new generation of women fans, such as Italy's well-organised and vocal ultras.

It is a far cry from the days when attendance was limited to pockets of friends and families of the players alongside curious locals. The hearts and minds aspect of this tournament has been a runaway success but now it is all about winning and losing. — Reuters