

France headline tough World Cup Group I as Mbappe faces Haaland

AFP | Paris

Photos with Messi as World Cup debutants Jordan am to prove they belong.

Les Bleus have won the World Cup twice and lost two further finals on penalties in the last seven editions, including last time in Qatar when they were beaten by Argentina in a shoot-out after Kylian Mbappe scored a hat-trick in an epic contest.

France now go into their last tournament under long-serving coach Didier Deschamps, who has been in charge since 2012 and is expected to be replaced by Zinedine Zidane.

Deschamps is wary of a tough group and France have stumbled as favourites before — they arrived at the 2002 World Cup as holders and were eliminated in the group stage without scoring a goal.

Back then they lost their opening game to Senegal in Seoul, and they will hope history doesn't repeat itself when they play the Lions of Teranga in their first fixture this time, at the MetLife Stadium in New Jersey on June 16.

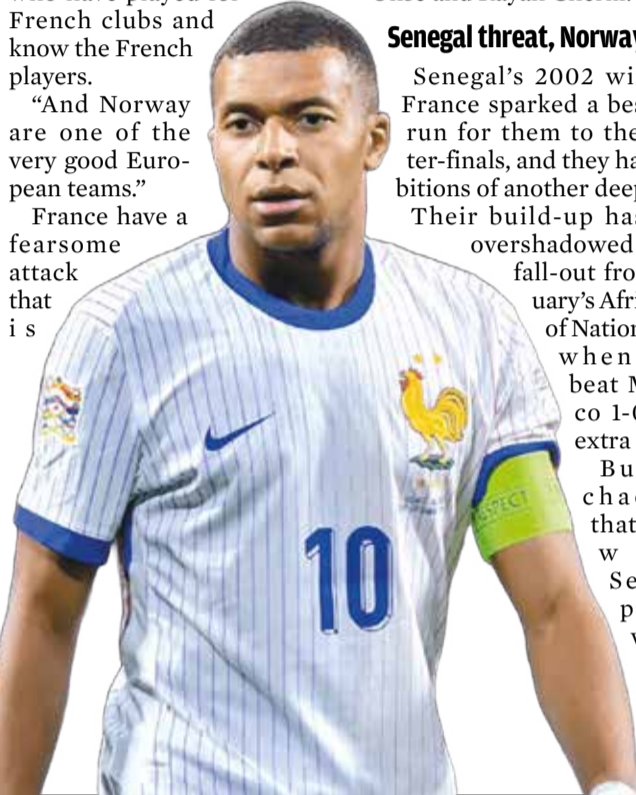
Kylian Mbappe

"It is one of the most difficult groups, if not the hardest," said Deschamps.

"We have a fraternal relationship with Senegal because there are a lot of dual national players who have played for French clubs and know the French players.

"And Norway are one of the very good European teams."

France have a fearsome attack that is



the envy of world football, led by captain Mbappe — top scorer in La Liga this season with Real Madrid — and reigning Ballon d'Or Ousmane Dembele, but also featuring the likes of Michael Olise and Rayan Cherki.

Senegal threat, Norway back

Senegal's 2002 win over France sparked a best-ever run for them to the quarter-finals, and they have ambitions of another deep foray. Their build-up has been overshadowed by the fall-out from January's Africa Cup of Nations final, when they beat Morocco 1-0 after extra time.

But the chaos in that game, when Senegal players walked off the pitch in protest at a late penalty awarded to the hosts, led to Pape Thiaw's team later being stripped of their title by the Confederation of African Football. They have appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

Senegal's squad is still led by Sadio Mane, who is now 34 and missed the last World Cup with injury.

Norway are back on the scene, reaching their first World Cup since 1998 and first major tournament since Euro 2000.

Their success under coach Stale Solbakken has been centred around Erling Haaland, the 25-year-old Manchester City superstar who is one of the best pure number nines of the 21st

century.

Norway start against Iraq in Boston and play Senegal at the MetLife Stadium before returning to Boston to play France.

That showdown will see the Premier League's top scorer Erling Haaland take on Mbappe. Haaland scored 16 goals in eight qualifiers, including wins home and away against Italy.

He is ably supported by the likes of Arsenal playmaker Martin Odegaard and Atletico Madrid centre-forward Alexander Sorloth.

"We believe that we have a strong squad...that has achieved great results over a

long period of time," said Solbakken.

Those three sides will all aim to progress, with the eight best third-placed teams also reaching the last 32.

Simply being there is an enormous achievement for Iraq, who last graced the World Cup in 1986.

Their qualifying campaign took in 21 games, including a dramatic Asian play-off against the United Arab Emirates.

Iraq secured qualification with victory over Bolivia in an inter-continental play-off in Mexico in March.

"We qualified last. If you went through every individual player and every team, and the transfer price of all the players, we would probably be the lowest ranked at the World Cup," their coach Graham Arnold told AFP.

"But it's a World Cup. Anything can happen."



Erling Haaland

16

goals were scored by Erling Haaland in just eight World Cup qualifying matches

Swiatek advances at French Open

AFP | Paris

Iga Swiatek booked her place in the last 16 of the French Open yesterday.

Four-time women's champion Swiatek beat Magda Linette 6-4, 6-4 to begin play on Court Philippe Chatrier, with temperatures set to climb to 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit) later in the day.

Third seed Swiatek dug herself out of an early 2-0 hole against the 35th-ranked Linette, who won their most recent meeting at Miami in March.

Swiatek broke three times in the opening set to nose ahead, and then surged into a 4-1 lead in the second set.

She overcame a stumble as she tried to close it out, before sealing victory to set up an intriguing match-up with the in-form Marta Kostyuk.



Poland's Iga Swiatek plays a backhand return to Poland's Magda Linette

"It was a good match. I played much better than Miami," said Swiatek, who moved to appoint Francisco Roig, a longtime coach of Rafael Nadal, in the

wake of her loss to Linette two months ago.

Kostyuk, the 15th seed, continued her fine run with a 6-4, 6-3 win over Switzerland's Vik-

torija Golubic.

She is unbeaten in 15 matches on clay this season following titles in Madrid and Rouen.

"Marta is having a great season. She always had a game to play well," said Swiatek.

"So good for her. But I'm going to focus on myself, prepare tactically, as before any other match, and we'll see."

Russian teenager Mirra Andreeva swept into the last 16 with a 6-4, 6-2 victory over Czech 27th seed Marie Bouzkova.

The eighth-seeded Andreeva goes on to face either 2023 French Open runner-up Karolina Muchova or Jil Teichmann on Sunday for a place in the quarter-finals.

Andreeva's best Grand Slam run came at Roland Garros in 2024 when she reached the semi-finals.

Vingegaard nears Giro triumph as teammate Kuss takes stage 19

AFP | Alleghe

Jonas Vingegaard took another step towards winning his first Giro d'Italia yesterday after emerging unscathed from a brutal 19th stage won by his teammate Sepp Kuss.

Pre-race favourite Vingegaard has one more stage to get through to ensure his overall triumph in the Italian Grand Tour, with Sunday's finale a procession around Rome.

The Visma-Lease a Bike rider stuck in the main peloton all day until the final, punishing climb to Alleghe after 151 kilometres of energy-sapping riding through the Dolomite mountains.

He then made sure that he stayed close to nearest rival Fe-



Jonas Vingegaard in action

lix Gall, who remains just over four minutes off the pace.

Attention now turns to Saturday's penultimate stage, which features two huge climbs to Piancavallo, with Vingegaard

knowing that he will reign supreme if he holds out.

"This is for sure one of the highlights of my Giro. It's in the top three," said Vingegaard.

"The big goal will be to stay

in the pink jersey after the end of the stage."

Vingegaard did concede the lead of the Mountains standings to Italian Giulio Ciccone, who was first over four of yesterday's six classified climbs but was denied a stage win by American Kuss who overtook him in the final two kilometres.

"It was never the primary goal (to win the stage). The main challenge was to win the pink jersey with Jonas," said Kuss, who's mother was watching on from near the finish line.

"When they told me the other night I had to go in the break, I knew I had to seize the opportunity. It's something I always dreamed of but every year it gets harder and harder.

Rishabh Pant quits as Lucknow captain after IPL flop

AFP | New Delhi

The most expensive play-er of the Indian Premier League, Rishabh Pant, has quit as captain of Lucknow Super Giants after it finished last in the T20 tournament, the team said yesterday.

The India Test match star has had a woeful season after being bought for \$3.21 million at the 2025 IPL auction, making him the most expensive player in the lucrative league's history.

"Rishabh approached the franchisee with his request and we have respectfully accepted it," Tom Moody, Lucknow's director of cricket, said in a statement.

"These decisions are never easy," the former Australia all-rounder added.

"We are grateful for everything Rishabh has brought to this dressing room as captain. Our focus now is on



Rishabh Pant

the collective -- rebuilding and restructuring to reach the best standards."

Pant, 28, is the second India star to quit Lucknow captaincy after KL Rahul, who led the team from 2022 to 2024.

Pant scored just 312 runs from 14 innings at a strike rate of 138.05 this season, with his team finishing last on the points table with 10 losses and just four wins.

In the last season, Lucknow finished seventh out of 10 teams under Pant's leadership.

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