

Italy and Portugal facing up to possibility of disastrous absence from 2022 World Cup



- At least one of the last two European champions will miss out on a place at Qatar 2022 after the UEFA playoffs in March

When the draw for the UEFA playoffs for the 2022 World Cup was completed on Friday, one thing dominated the headlines: Either Italy or Portugal would not be going to Qatar.

The winners of the last two editions of the European Championship failed to top their World Cup qualifying groups, missing out to Serbia and Switzerland respectively, and now might have to face each other for the right to progress to next year's finals. That is if they overcome their "semi-final" playoff opponents of North Macedonia (for Italy) and Turkey (for Portugal).

For Italy, the situation is borderline embarrassing.

The Azzurri, less than six months on from their success at the 2020 UEFA European Championship, find themselves having to reach Qatar the hard way, and their fans might be starting to fear the worst if recent history is anything to go by.

After all, their country also failed to secure automatic qualification for the 2018 World Cup after losing to Sweden in a two-legged playoff, one of the darkest moments in Italy's football history.

Italy's stumble in the qualifiers is all the stranger as Roberto Mancini had sparked a revival that culminated in winning Euro 2020 in July on the back of a long unbeaten run. All looked rosy for the Italians as they returned to World Cup action in the fall.

Italy had started very strongly in Group C but found their path getting complicated after drawing twice in their last three games.

Switzerland took full advantage of this, catching up and overtaking Italy in the standings and qualifying directly for the World Cup.

It was an epilogue that would have been hard to predict a few months ago, and the disappointment after the final whistle in Belfast, after Italy's 0-0 draw with Northern Ireland, was evident on the faces of the entire team and coaching staff. Among the saddest was Jorginho, who in the dressing room could not hold back his tears, having missed a penalty in each of the two draws with Switzerland in the qualifiers. One successful conversion and it would be the Swiss sweating over progress to Qatar now.

For now, Mancini remains firmly in his post, with the Euro 2020 still fresh in everyone's minds, and even his few critics have had sympathy for the spate of injuries the squad suffered ahead of the match against Northern Ireland.

The same cannot be said about Portugal.

Fernando Santos, their 67-year-old coach, remains the only one to give Portugal a title, but Euro 2016 grows distant with every passing year and the state of grace will not last forever.

In terms of results, his record is hardly a disaster, but neither has it been outstanding when you consider the talent that the football-crazy nation has at its disposal.

The fog around the coach is almost always based on poor quality football, especially given the caliber of players in the Portuguese squad at the moment.

Portugal's best players grace some of Europe's top clubs including Manchester United, Manchester City, Atlético Madrid, Liverpool, PSG, Roma, among others. Many of them are the best players at these clubs. They are therefore the best of the best.

And yet the football played by the national team pales in comparison to their club exploits, and the Portuguese blame their coach for that.

The Luz Stadium was supposed to witness a celebration in front of 65,000 spectators when Serbia came to Lisbon for the final group qualifier, but instead, and at the end of a historic night, the visitors punished Cristiano Ronaldo and his colleagues in the dying meets of the match to win 2-1.

My sources in Portugal tell me that Santos could be approaching the end of his reign as coach of the Portuguese national team.

The Portuguese Football Federation has backed him up to the playoffs, but many supporters and members of the press no longer believe that he can get the best out of this group of players.

This was evident when, at the press conference after the Serbia debacle, a journalist asked Santos: "How do you explain the poor football that the National Team presents, given the talent it has at its disposal?"

Santos looked at the journalist. He swallowed dry, straightened his tie, and said nothing.

Portugal, of course, still possess arguably world football's greatest trump card.

Whatever lack of confidence there is in the coach, the nation can always count on Ronaldo to inspire his team in such moments.

It would be a shame not to see either Italy or Portugal in the World Cup, but sadly that is now inevitable.

In March we will know which one will miss out, if not, sensationally, both.
