

Mbappe gets off to winning start as France captain

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Online Desk: Kylian Mbappe marked his first game as France captain on Friday with two goals and an assist as the World Cup finalists romped to a 4-0 win against a depleted Netherlands side in a Euro 2024 qualifier in Paris. Mbappe has succeeded long-standing France skipper Hugo Lloris and the new era got off to a flying start as the Paris Saint-Germain superstar set up the pink-haired Antoine Griezmann to score inside two minutes.

Dayot Upamecano bundled in the second goal in the eighth minute and Mbappe got his name on the scoresheet to make it 3-0 before the midway point in the first half. Mbappe wrapped up the victory in emphatic fashion with two minutes remaining, before the Netherlands' Memphis Depay had a stoppage-time penalty saved by goalkeeper Mike Maignan. It was a display of ruthless efficiency from Didier Deschamps' side against a Dutch team missing several key players after a virus swept through their squad.

At least their toughest assignment in qualifying Group B is now out of the way and their next game is at home to Gibraltar on Monday. The French now visit the Republic of Ireland but it is going to take something remarkable for them to fail to qualify for next year's Euro given the top two teams in each group go through. "We didn't want to disappoint our fans. This was our first game back here after the World Cup and we really wanted to pick up where we left off there, except for the final," Mbappe told broadcaster TF1.

Of his own game, Mbappe added: "I try to do my job, be decisive and bring everyone else with me. It worked well today but this is just the beginning so let's not get carried away." Dutch coach Ronald Koeman referred to the virus that hit his squad as he reacted to the defeat. "You know the circumstances, but I don't want to make excuses for this mediocre performance," he said. "There is nothing very positive to take from today." There were four changes to the France team compared to the World Cup final, with Lloris and centre-back Raphael Varane having retired -- they were honoured on the Stade de France pitch before kick-off -- while Ousmane Dembele is injured and Olivier Giroud started on the bench.

In came AC Milan's Maignan in goal and Liverpool's Ibrahima Konate in central defence, while there were starts for Kingsley Coman and Randal Kolo Muani too. The Netherlands, with Koeman back for a second spell in charge, were without Cody Gakpo, Matthijs de Ligt, Sven Botman, Denzel Dumfries and Frenkie de Jong for a variety of reasons. France simply blew them away.

Mbappe has promised to play a unifying role after taking over the armband, although he also admitted that Griezmann was disappointed at being overlooked for the captaincy by Deschamps. Usually when Mbappe gets the ball on the left side of the box he shapes to shoot towards the far corner. That he didn't in the second minute was telling, as he instead chose to play a square pass for the arriving Griezmann to finish first-time.

Griezmann, reprising the midfield role he operated so remarkably at the World Cup, then set up the second. His free-kick from the right was not properly dealt with by Dutch goalkeeper Jasper Cillessen, and Bayern Munich defender Upamecano was left with an easy finish. There was an element of real class about the third goal as Kolo Muani's decision not to touch Aurelien Tchouameni's through ball completely did for the Netherlands defence and left Mbappe through to beat the goalkeeper.

France were 3-0 up with barely 30 percent possession, and Koeman made a substitution before half-time, replacing Kenneth Taylor with Wout Weghorst. Only a fine Cillessen save from a Konate header stopped France from scoring again before the break, and substitute Moussa Diaby had a goal disallowed late on.

However, Mbappe sealed the win two minutes from time, pouncing on a loose ball before firing a shot through the legs of Jurrien Timber and into the bottom corner. The evening concluded with Maignan

stopping Depay's penalty, which had been awarded for an Upamecano handball.