

Arteta fears mental block after FA Cup exit



● REUTERS

THE GUARDIAN – Mikel Arteta fears his Arsenal players have developed a psychological block in front of goal and has called on them to reset after Sunday's 2-0 home loss to Liverpool in the FA Cup.

Arsenal dominated for the opening hour, spurning numerous chances – particularly in the first half. And they were reeled in by Liverpool who scored their goals late on; first through a Jakub Kiwior own goal and then Luis Díaz.

Arsenal have won only one of their past seven games in all competitions, with this a third defeat in a row – after those in the Premier League against West Ham and Fulham.

“Probably it has,” Arteta said, when asked whether the missed chances were becoming a psychological issue. “Especially after today – more than it was against Fulham or West Ham before that. That’s why I think we need to reset.”

“It is very difficult. But if the team is getting hammered and not playing well and not deserving to win football matches I’d be much more worried. I’m worried because I love winning and we have to win many more games. That’s the thing we have to change and probably what has to be reset is up here.”

Jürgen Klopp was delighted to advance, especially as he missed the ill Virgil van Dijk and Mohamed Salah, who is on Africa Cup of Nations duty – among many others. He saluted his players for their resilience. But it was Arteta that was the more quotable afterwards, especially when he cast doubt on Arsenal’s ability to sign a new No 9 in January. A section of the fanbase believe this is the only answer to the current issues.

“At the moment it does not look realistic,” Arteta said. “What my job is and what we have to do is improve our players and try to get better results with the players we have.”

“I haven’t seen a team in the past six months that has generated what we have done against Liverpool in the last two games [including the 1-1 league draw at Anfield on 23 December]. We haven’t capitalised. Not just today but in the last few games as well.”

“Merit-wise there is no question that we deserve to win the games but the results are very different.”



● IWF

Zagreb Open Ranking Series:

Qassempour to chase a tilt at Olympic berth in wrestling season opener

Sports Desk

With the Olympic wrestling qualifiers getting underway in two months, Kamran Qassempour will be looking to have a statement performance at the season-opening UWW Ranking Series event when the Zagreb Open kicks off on Wednesday.

The Iranian will make only a second appearance in the 97kg weight class as he is eager to add the Olympic glory to his two world 92kg titles in Paris next summer. The campaign in the Croatian capital could be quite a daunting task for the Iranian as his sole bout in the Olympic weight division saw him fall to a comprehensive defeat against decorated American Kyle Snyder at the 2022 Freestyle World Cup, no to

mention he has been sidelined for months with a groin injury, which kept him out of last September’s World Championships in Belgrade as well as the Hangzhou Asian Games. Meanwhile, Iranian prodigy Amir Ali Azarpira – a winner of double world under-23 golds – will be aiming to throw down the gauntlet to his fellow 97kg countryman ahead of the qualification events following a dominant campaign at the National Championships in December.

Superheavyweight rivalry

A domestic superheavyweight rivalry for the Olympic spot could be settled in Zagreb as the two Iranian young guns Amirhossein Zare’ and Amir-Reza Ma’soumi will be a part of the 125kg contests.

Having bagged a second world gold in three years in September – defeating high-profile wrestlers Taha Akgül and Geno Petriashvili in the process – Zare’ is widely regarded as the favorite to walk away with the ultimate prize in Paris but will first have to see off competition from 19-year-old Ma’soumi – a world champion in all age groups – who is in dazzling form after cruising to the top podium at the National Championships.

Elsewhere, Rahman Amouzad is desperate to bounce back from a below-par run in the international events last year.

The Iranian was from his ruthless form when began his world title defense in Belgrade and only managed to finish fifth to secure an Olympic 65kg quota for the country.

He then represented Iran in the Asian Games but settled for an unimpressive silver, courtesy of an 11-1 loss to Mongolian Tömör-Ochiryn Tulga.

Joining Amouzad in the 65kg contests is Abbas Ebrahimzadeh, who was handed a spot in Zagreb after a final victory over Ali Khorramdel in the national event. Two-time world bronze medalist Younes Emami and national champion Hossein Abouzari will take part in the 74kg competitions – in what will likely decide who will be the Iranian contestant at the Olympic qualification tournaments in the coming months. American sensation Jordan Burroughs pulled out of the 74kg event last week but there will be a number of up-and-coming faces competing in the Olympic class,

including Azerbaijan’s Dzhabrail Gadzhiev and Georgios Kougioumtsidis of Greece.

Hadi Vafaeipour punched his Zagreb ticket after a surprise 86kg national title in December – coming out on top against Ali Savadkouhi in the final – but surely knows he will be out of contention for Paris once nine-time world and Olympic medalist Hassan Yazdani is back on the mat following a surgery on his injured shoulder in November.

In the non-Olympic 79kg contests, meanwhile, Iran will be represented by reigning world bronze medalist Mohammad Nokhodi and national champion Abodallah Sheikh A’zami, though the former could still move to a lower weight class after the tournament to take a shot at an Olympic quota.

James scores 25 points, Lakers hold off Clippers to snap losing streak

AP – LeBron James had 25 points, eight rebounds and seven assists, Taurean Prince hit a tiebreaking 3-pointer with 1:17 to play and the Los Angeles Lakers snapped a four-game losing streak with a 106-103 victory over the Los Angeles Clippers on Sunday night.

Anthony Davis had 22 points and 10 rebounds for the Lakers, who beat the surging Clippers for the second straight time after losing 11 in a row to their hallway rivals.

While James and Davis carried them, Prince and D’Angelo Russell also made key plays down the stretch as the Lakers hung on for just their fourth victory in 14 games since winning the NBA’s Inaugural In-Season Tournament.

“We played like we needed to win, like it was a must-win,” Davis said. “We competed on both

sides of the basketball. We’ve just got to build off of it. We know what we have in the locker room. We know what it takes to win, and we displayed that tonight.” James set the tone shortly after halftime with a ferocious dunk on Paul George, and the Lakers never trailed in the fourth quarter despite blowing a 10-point lead. They still couldn’t exhale until Norman Powell’s 3-point attempt rattled in and out at the buzzer. “Overtime,” James said when asked what he was thinking while he watched Powell’s shot. “It looked like it was good for sure. Right on line. ... We’ve got to continue to get better. Try to use this to catapult (us to play) a little bit better. Better play from us, but it still don’t take away from the fact of how we’ve been playing like the last 11, 12 games.” Paul George scored 22 points and Ivica Zubac had 22 points and 19

rebounds for the Clippers, whose five-game winning streak ended. Kawhi Leonard scored 15 points, and James Harden had 15 points and nine assists in the childhood Lakers fan’s first game against them since getting traded home to the Clippers, who have still won 14 of their last 17. Neither team took a double-digit lead until Russell’s third 3-pointer put the Lakers up 92-82 early in the fourth. The Clippers rallied with nine consecutive points down the stretch, and they tied it on Powell’s three free throws with 2:19 to play while the Lakers went into a 2-for-7 slump with six turnovers.

▶ *Lakers’ LeBron James dunks during an NBA victory over the Clippers at Crypto.com Arena, Los Angeles, CA, U.S., on January 7, 2024.*
● ALLEN J. SCHABEN/
LOS ANGELES TIMES

