

the back with a rather defensive mentality. I think Douglas Costa could be a vital replacement for Willian. Willian and Gabriel Jesus were somewhat not connecting. With Neymar playing almost like a False 9, I think Douglas could pace up the game much more. Willian is a player who fits better in a Chelsea-like game plan alongside strikers like Diego Costa.

Selim: This World Cup is turning out to be one of the most unpredictable ones of all time. The Asian and African teams have developed radically, especially if you look at Japan, and also Saudi Arabia who defeated Egypt ruthlessly.

Iresh: If we go back 8-10 years, Japan had Hidetoshi Nakata who was perhaps the most famous Asian footballer of his time. But now only except a central defender, the rest of the players of the Japanese team play for European clubs. Not even a single player of Senegal plays for their domestic league. The game has gone global. Players are facing other skillful players regularly in league clashes and studying their strategies. The term 'artistic football' has perhaps achieved an updated definition.

Iresh: I don't think the World Cup is the right place to introduce such technologies. There should have been an adjustment period for the match officials. You can clearly see that the referees are not really comfortable with VAR yet. Also, we have seen radically different decisions given in cases of exact same scenarios in different games. Boateng got away with some serious charges because of field referee's liberal attitude.

Hamin: Exactly, I think the main challenge still lies within the mentality of the field referees.

Iresh: And think what might happen when it is applied in league matches! There's so much money bet on every single second of the games, the pressure on the referees is going to be absolutely nerve wrecking. As a result, 90 minute games might turn into 270 minute games, VAR being applied every time. This is why, many of the otherwise very modern footballers have voted against the VAR system, unless it sees development.

Hamin: Perhaps the field refs could communicate upstairs using devices. It looks so funny that the refs have to run

fan, as well as a Portugal supporter. Ronaldo has played some good matches this World Cup.

Iresh: That's true. Let's not go into that age old debate of who is better than whom. When it comes to being the greatest of their generation, both Messi and Ronaldo are equally strong contenders. One has better club records; another has better national team success.

Hamin: This is an issue that keeps surfacing during football discussions. Their performances in national jersey and club jersey are on different poles, which create much of the controversies. Although Ronaldo has paid back some of his debts wearing Portugal colors, Messi had a lot to give. If they are truly the world's greatest footballers, how come they could not prove their prowess during the World Cup?

Selim: You have to keep in mind the difference in the quality of the other players in their teams.

Iresh: Would you like it if I pick up the bass now and start playing for Miles? (Laughter) You know how pathetic I am going to sound! And there lies your answer.

playing for Barca for a long time, alongside almost the same players with the same strategies.

Hamin: Another important thing is how much time and effort these players invest to integrate themselves with the national team. How well the players are gelling together determines the fate of a team.

Peya: But don't you think the pressure on Messi is always at a maximum level?

Iresh: Yes, and it shouldn't be that way.

Hamin: Talk about their coach, Sampaoli!

Iresh: Yes, that guy! Thank god, he wore something he wouldn't take off during the match with Nigeria (Laughter)

Hamin: Any way, I think this is becoming a really memorable World Cup in Russia this time.

Iresh: I think the quality of the game has rather dropped, because the players are somewhat being protected. And it's obvious, if Messi or Neymar gets injured, it'll result in the loss of millions of dollars.

Hamin: I still remember the incident of Ronaldo being forced to play despite not being match fit. Which World Cup was that?



Peya: No team is an underdog when it comes to the World Cup. And we have seen the otherwise 'small teams' display their exquisite skills on the field to prove what caliber they really possess. So it has become hard to predict the results beforehand!

Selim: Previously we could bank on the Latin American teams easily for their history of artistic football. But now European football has become a whole different sensation, equally titillating. This World Cup we have seen numerous attempts on goal from even 20 yards outside the D-Box. We are seeing a lot more penalties and free kicks. I heard that this year there has already been a record number of cards shown so far. And shocking decisions have been given against the so-called giants as well. So it is clear that the FIFA officials are trying to make the games seem as non-biased as possible.

Tasneem: Another talk of the town is the new digital technology, VAR, freshly introduced in the World Cup. What's your take on this, Irish bhai?

back and forth to that box beside dugout (Laughter)! Do you remember the Ronaldo incident the other day? I think it was a clear red card.

Iresh: Come on! I agree it was a bit rough, but that's just the nature of the game! If one cannot get back from a rough tackle, he should rather go and play chess (Laughter)! Nonetheless, VAR is helping us decide which player is a better actor. I mean, I feel inferiority complex when I watch Neymar. I could never be as good, in terms of my playing ability. But he is far more talented than I am as an actor as well! (Laughter) On a serious note though, Messi gets free-kick almost every time he is charged. The reason is also very simple. Every time Messi will fall, he will get up and run for the ball again. So the referees have a firm belief that when Messi does not get up after a charge, that definitely is a foul. Messi is not into false shenanigans, and so he gets his rewards rightfully. I wonder why Neymar, even after playing so many matches with Messi, has become more like Cristiano (Laughter)!
Peya: That's not fair! I am a diehard CR7

Hamin: But they are being compared to players like Maradona. Maradona never cared about who is running beside him, or perhaps who was playing the bass in his band! (Laughter)

Iresh: I think Maradona is a totally different kind of a player. Maradona is the best player of all time in my opinion. He was the lone stallion pulling the entire chariot of Argentina and Napoli back in his time.

Hamin: He still has that same flare to himself. Who else wears two watches in two hands? (Laughter)

Iresh: The philosophy of football has changed a lot over the years. Football is now much more systematic. If you look closely, unlike Barcelona under Guardiola, Real Madrid never really had any fixed setup. Their players change, managers change very often. And before coming to Madrid, Ronaldo played for Man UTD. I think this gives him an advantage of being used to playing with alternating setups. He has adapted to it. On the other hand, it is difficult for Messi to play for Argentina because he has been

Iresh: The final match of the 1998 World Cup!

Hamin: Oh yes. And later it was disclosed that the sponsors pushed the team management to do it.

Peya: With teams like Argentina, Germany and Portugal out of the World Cup, I think for many the excitement has faded already.

Tasneem: So to wrap it up, let's hear your predictions!

Hamin: I will be very surprised if Belgium's name isn't amongst the toppers.

Selim: The cup will remain in Europe.

Peya: No, you have to be more specific, Selim bhai! (Laughter) I think the cup is going to Belgium!

Hamin: The British might have the final laugh as well, you never know!

Tasneem: It was amazing to talk to you all. Thanks a lot for joining the conversation. Let's hope that the World Cup gets much more dramatic than it has been so far and at the same time does not lose its glam!