



“The World Cup is a very important way to measure the good players, and the great ones. It is a test of a great player.”

Pele, former Brazilian forward and the only player to win three World Cups.



QUALIFIED TEAMS	
Host:	Qatar
Europe:	Germany, England, Spain, France, Netherlands, Portugal, Switzerland, Belgium, Croatia, Serbia, Poland, Denmark
South America:	Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Ecuador
Africa:	Senegal, Ghana, Morocco, Tunisia, Cameroon
Asia:	Japan, Iran, South Korea, Saudi Arabia
North America:	Canada, Mexico, USA
TEAMS THAT CAN STILL QUALIFY	
Europe:	Wales, Scotland, Ukraine
South America:	Peru
Asia:	Australia, UAE
North America:	Costa Rica
Oceania:	New Zealand



GOALS ACHIEVED, dreams shattered

The result proved too much for Belmadi, who announced his resignation after the game after just a fourth defeat in his 48-game reign.

SAMAMA RAHMAN

“We collapsed. We put our lives on hold for this match and this success. For our country, our people. We only had this motivation in mind. It is much more than a personal disappointment.”

As much as the World Cup qualifiers were about the winners, their journey will continue. The bigger thread, which began spinning as Italy exited to North Macedonia a week earlier, continued well into Tuesday night as 14 countries were asked to compete for seven slots in the space of six whirlwind hours.

For those on the wrong end, failure to secure passage to the World Cup at the final hurdle would be all that would be remembered, the past two years of progress and development banished by the demons of losing it all.

Algeria coach Djamel Belmadi, to whom the introductory quote can be attributed, provided one of the defining images of that breathless night. Head in hands, digging his way into



the grass in the apparent hope that the pitch would swallow him, he summed up how every ‘loser’ felt.

His team had not lost a game since 2018 and were just two games short of Italy’s all-time tally at 37 matches unbeaten when they were undone by Equatorial Guinea at the African Cup of Nations in January this year.

Yet, the heart they took from that impressive run saw them turn up on Tuesday night against Cameroon as favourites in Bida after getting a 1-0 lead in the reverse encounter away from home. After their opponents scored a quick goal on 22 minutes and the match stalled and went into extra time, the Algerians waited over for a goal.

When it finally came through Ahmed Touba in the 118th minute, just two minutes

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before the end, they were euphoric. Then, in a heartbeat, they came crashing down. Cameroon netted a second four minutes into stoppage time and, just like that, they sealed a spot to the World Cup by virtue of away goals.

The result proved too much for Belmadi, who was reported to be considering handing in his resignation after just a fourth defeat in his 48-game reign.

There was a similar look of dejection on the face of Mohamed Salah, Premier League megastar. He weathered the beams of lasers and five security guards huddled around and escorted him out of the stadium as bottles were flung in his direction.

Throughout, Salah did not bat an eye.

Perhaps he could not yet fathom exactly what had happened. Perhaps he was wondering how destiny could betray him again.

Egypt had gone to Senegal with a 1-0 lead, but they saw the hosts replicate that result and force a penalty shootout. Salah missed his spot-kick and then watched Liverpool teammate Sadio Mane score the winning penalty to deny the Egyptians, just as he had done after the African Cup of Nations finals in January.

It was a cruel twist of fate for the Egyptian, who had been hobbled at the 2018 World Cup by an injury sustained just months prior to the showpiece event in Russia. At the next World Cup, he will be 33, holding onto a final sliver of hope of some kind of World Cup redemption.

Italy, who lost to North Macedonia in a play-off semi-final, also featured against the other losing semi-finalists Turkey. The Azzurri earned a 3-2 win in the dead rubber, but when asked if the pain had deepened after watching Portugal beat North Macedonia, manager Roberto Mancini did not mince his words, saying: “We will have regrets all the way until December.”

Amidst all the doom and gloom, there was a sombre reminder of more urgent matters that could serve to put things in perspective. Ukraine, besieged by Russia, will not learn their fate at least until June, when they are scheduled to meet for their play-off semi-final against Scotland.

From the winners’ circle, Cristiano Ronaldo celebrated after Bruno Fernandes netted twice to seal the Selecao’s progression to Qatar. “Goal achieved, we’re at the Qatar World Cup, we’re in our rightful place!” Ronaldo posted on Instagram.

Portugal’s qualification means Ronaldo, 37, will feature in his fifth World Cup after playing in Germany in 2006, South Africa in 2010, Brazil in 2014 and Russia in 2018. Portugal did not get past the round of 16 in any of those tournaments, but Ronaldo, who was stern in saying that he had not yet decided if it would be his final salvo, will be hoping for better times ahead.

QATAR 2022

It will be the second World Cup to be held entirely in Asia after the 2002 tournament was hosted jointly by South Korea and Japan. It will also be the first World Cup ever to be held in the Arab world. Because of the intense summer heat in Qatar, the World Cup will be held from late-November to mid-December, meaning that, for the first time, the tournament will not take place in May, June or July and will be played over a reduced timeframe of 28 days.

DATES: 21 NOVEMBER - 18 DECEMBER

TEAMS: 32

VENUES: 8 (IN 5 HOST CITIES)



CANADA END 36-YEAR WAIT

Canada sealed a momentous World Cup return after a 4-0 thrashing of Jamaica, sending the home fans -- and star player Alphonso Davies watching online -- into raptures on a freezing evening in Toronto last Monday. They qualified for football's greatest stage for the first time in 36 years since Mexico 1986, where they lost all their group matches and failed to score.

Along with veterans and a bunch of youngsters, led by a spirited coach named John Herdman, Canada returned to the forefront of international football. Throughout the third qualifying round of CONCACAF, they were instrumental and took four points each from their strongest challengers, the USA and Mexico.

“When I first took over and I said, ‘We’re going to qualify for the World Cup’. I don’t think they believed us. I’m happy for them because all of these fans have waited and waited and waited, and hung in with us - and we’re going,” said English coach Herdman.





Brazil and Argentina ready to break Europe’s domination?

It has been 20 years since a team from South America lifted the World Cup, although not many are willing to believe that 2002 and Brazil’s 2-0 win over Germany in the final was that long ago.

But the balance of power has shifted very much since then and all of the last four winners – Italy, Spain, Germany, France -- have come from Europe.

However, this time around both Brazil and Argentina have shown promise of ending Europe's domination come November. Neither side have lost a game in qualifying so far. Brazil’s win over Bolivia took their total points to 45 last Wednesday, a record in the South American qualifying, while Lionel Messi’s Argentina extended their unbeaten run to a record-equalling 31 matches.

Brazil have secured top spot in the CONMEBOL’s qualifying round, with arch-rivals Argentina certain to finish second. Both powerhouses are still to play the fixture against each other after their original match in Sao Paulo was suspended last September due to four Argentine players failing to obey coronavirus protocols in Brazil.

