

Alfaz anticipates excitement in ‘special’ World Cup

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Former Bangladesh international Alfaz Ahmed believes the Qatar World Cup is going to be full of excitement, especially considering that the world’s two most popular footballers, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Rolando, will be making their last appearance in the greatest show on earth.

The 2022 World Cup will begin tonight when the hosts take on Ecuador.

“The Qatar World Cup is a special one because it is going to be the last World Cup for Messi and Ronaldo, who have been at the center of world football for the past 20 years,” Alfaz said. “Football has had two stars. Messi has won the Ballon d’or seven times and Ronaldo five times. They competed for a long time, but they are going to play their last World Cup. Now, it is about seeing how they end their World Cup campaigns,” the former national striker said. “Footballers like Messi and Rolando are generational, so I think the whole world will wait for the emergence of the next star players of that calibre.”

The Mohammedan assistant coach also opined that Brazil and Argentina being tagged favourites at the World Cup would provide added flavor.

“I think Brazil and Argentina are favourites but Brazil are ahead because they have a balanced squad. Brazil do not have a shortage of anything. Being atop the FIFA Rankings is also evidence of their supremacy at the moment,” added Alfaz, whose allegiance lies with Argentina.

“Argentina have been in good rhythm, especially under Lionel Scaloni. He guided Argentina to the Copa America title. The positive aspect is that although Argentina



usually have problems with their goalkeeping or defence in almost every World Cup, they are now strong in these positions. I think Argentina also have a good chance to end their title drought,” the 50-year-old added.

Alfaz urged Brazil and Argentina fans to be calm and enjoy the games.

“Bangladesh is divided loyalties to Brazil and Argentina so the whole nation will engage with the World Cup in a cheerful mood as long as they are in the race. However, their exit would make people very sad. The World Cup will virtually come to an end for most fans in Bangladesh if they are eliminated, although there are some who support other nations,” Alfaz said.

Alfaz Ahmed also saw the possibility of European nations like Belgium, France or the Netherlands going all the way. “I think Belgium are a good side although their squad is aging. Netherlands and France also have a good chance to win. France have players with good temperament, players who can make the difference in big matches.”

He also believes that Asia should feel proud that Qatar was hosting a World Cup. “I think the Qatar World Cup is going to be a very colourful one. It is also a point of pride for Asia that Qatar is hosting the World Cup alone. If they succeed, then the doors to hosting World Cups in Asia will open for other countries,” said Alfaz.



PSG trio set to take no prisoners in Qatar

AFP, Doha

There is a thread that connects the three leading favourites to win the World Cup starting in Qatar on Sunday.

Brazil, Argentina and holders France have been cited as the main contenders for good reason, not least because of the identity of their star players.

Lionel Messi captains an Argentina team on a 36-game unbeaten run, Neymar leads a formidable Brazil side and France’s hopes of retaining the trophy will depend to a large extent on Kylian Mbappe.

The trio of Messi, Neymar and Mbappe have been united at Paris Saint-Germain by the wealth of the French club’s Qatari owners.

Their relationship has dominated headlines in France this season, and their performances have been outstanding.

Qatar created shockwaves in December 2010 when it won the right to host this year’s World Cup. A little over six months later, Qatar Sports Investments bought PSG.

Fast forward a decade and they have been transformed from an ailing club into a major force.

Mbappe and Neymar became the two most expensive signings in football history when they moved to PSG in 2017.

Messi joined them in Paris last year following his departure from Barcelona.

They are one of the favourites to win this season’s Champions League, with Messi, Mbappe and Neymar having scored 46 goals between them in PSG’s 22 games so far.

The World Cup has been cited as a reason for their superb form, in particular in the case of Messi and Neymar.

‘MESSI IS THE BEST’

At 35, Messi knows he is unlikely to get another chance to win it. “It’s my last World Cup, surely,” he told ESPN Argentina recently.

A brief walk along Doha’s Corniche or in the nearby Souq Waqif marketplace is enough to gauge Messi’s popularity in Doha.

Supporters, often from Qatar’s large South Asian population, sport Argentina shirts with Messi’s name and number on the back as they sample the atmosphere on the eve of the tournament.

Some waited outside Argentina’s base into the early hours of Thursday, hoping for a glimpse of Messi as Lionel Scaloni’s squad arrived in Doha.

“Messi is the best. We like how Argentina are playing at the moment and with Messi they are the best,” one fan, a 36-year-old finance worker called Shabi originally from the Indian state of Kerala, told AFP.

Like Messi, Neymar is among the players whose images adorn the giant buildings in downtown Doha.

NEYMAR’S PAST TRAUMA

At 30, Neymar might have at least one more World Cup in him after this one, even if he has previously hinted that this could be his last.

Injury ruined the 2014 World Cup for him before Brazil lost to Belgium in the quarter-finals in 2018.

Since then injuries have hampered him in Paris. Until this season, when he has appeared fitter and sharper than ever.

“The World Cup is my greatest dream,” Neymar told British newspaper The Daily Telegraph this week. “It has

been since I understood what football was.”

MBAPPE REPRESENTS THE FUTURE

In stark contrast to his two club colleagues, Mbappe has already won the World Cup and was still a teenager when he did so with France in 2018.

It is he who represents the future, which is why PSG splashed huge sums to persuade him to sign a new deal at the end of last season rather than join Real Madrid.

Le Parisien recently reported that Paris would be paying Mbappe 630 million euros (\$652m) before tax over the duration of the three-year contract he signed in May.

PSG dismissed that report as “sensationalist”, but the figures mentioned highlight Mbappe’s status.

“Kylian is an extraordinary player,” his France teammate Lucas Hernandez said on Friday. “It is an honour to have him in our team.”

Mbappe’s France ended the hopes of Messi’s Argentina in the last 16 in 2018.

There is a chance they could meet again at the same stage this time. A semi-final between Argentina and Neymar’s Brazil is another possibility.

“We don’t discuss it very much but sometimes we joke about crossing paths with each other in the final,” Neymar told the Daily Telegraph.

Whatever happens, only one of PSG’s trio can leave Doha as a World Cup winner.

Assuming the hosts don’t go all the way, the French club’s Qatari owners will be delighted to see any of them lifting the trophy at the Lusail Stadium on December 18.

Rubel contending with Brazil-Argentina divide at home

SPORTS REPORTER

The love that Bangladeshi cricketers have for football is widely acknowledged and despite the Tigers being united on the cricketing field, there is always an air of rivalry when it comes to global events like the FIFA World Cup.

For pacer Rubel Hossain, a huge Ronaldinho fan and a die-hard Brazil supporter since childhood, that rivalry is now rearing its head in his own home.

“I was mesmerized by Ronaldinho’s skills since childhood. His style of football forced me to love this team. I think he is one of the best footballers in history and his dribbling skills are out of this world. In the current Brazil side, obviously Neymar will be the player to watch. But at the same time I think we have a very compact side this time around,” Rubel told The Daily Star yesterday.

The 32-year-old has found himself in a bit of a pickle given that his wife Dola Hossain is loyal to Argentina, but those lines in the sand are a part of



daily life during the World Cup season.

“I have been a huge Brazil supporter since childhood but I have had a rival in my own home since getting married as my wife is an Argentine fan. So, to strengthen my side, I forced my son to take my side. I bought him a Brazil jersey and made him a Brazil fan. My wife, not appreciating that, asked me to make a custom jersey: half-and-half between Brazil and Argentina.”

Despite his loyalties, Rubel termed Argentina one of the favourites and said that it was going to be a competitive tournament.

“As a Brazil fan, I would love to see my team lift the title. But the fact is that there are few teams as strong as Argentina, Germany and France. We will get an idea about strengths and weaknesses once we see them play. I am hoping this is going to be a cracker of a tournament since Brazil are in superb form this time around,” Rubel added.



The inviolable duopoly within Bangladesh fanbase

STAR SPORT REPORT

Although the Bangladesh football team never qualified for a FIFA World Cup and remain light years away from featuring in the foreseeable future, the football fever has never failed to get a grip on the massive fan base in the country whenever the greatest show on earth comes along every four years.

The excitement blows out of proportion in Bangladesh every time a World Cup looms, as evident with how the fans of the participating teams in the World Cup – especially the Argentina and Brazil fans, who make up the majority – spring into action.

Even as the 2022 edition commences today with Ecuador taking on hosts Qatar, the question of whether Brazil have a better chance of progressing further than Argentina, and vice versa, will inevitably dominate over the question of who will ultimately clinch the Qatar World Cup.

It’s hard to find neighbourhood fields without footballers wearing Argentina and Brazil jerseys during the World Cup season and, from Teknaf to Tetulia, the intense passion for football in Bangladesh can still be taken for granted to be felt across its 148,460 square-kilometre area.



Thus, it’s no wonder that The Washington Post could not help but feature a story on the Argentina-Brazil fan rivalry in Bangladesh, published on Friday. In the meantime, Our Bogura correspondent, Mostafa Shabuj, caught up with two fans from the respective archrivals camp and it was unsurprising to see the deep-rooted



emotional attachment for their beloved teams.

WHY SUPPORT BRAZIL OR ARGENTINA?

Argentina fan, Khalid Bin Sayed, 25, said:

“As an eighth grader during the South Africa World Cup in 2010, I watched

Argentina play for the first time and they left a lasting impact on my mind. To be honest, I don’t think any other team in the world play as artistically as Argentina do. Messi’s game, especially, is like magic. To be honest, I like Germany as well but I love Argentina from my heart, like the first love of my teenage years.”

Die-hard Brazil fan, Aktaruzzaman Sohag, 28, said:

“When you say the word football, Brazil first pops up in my mind. Of course, there are many good teams in the world but Brazil are my favorite team since childhood. My main reason is that every player of Brazil plays for victory, and so their win-ratio is higher than the rest in World Cups. While other countries depend on one or two key players, Brazil are filled with players who are best in their position and play as a unit. When you see their game, a sense of calmness fills your mind.”

EXPECTATIONS IN QATAR?

“I’m very confident that Brazil will win in Qatar. Brazil have a bunch of new star players to rely on to present a collective performance. Coach Tite has chosen some quality, in-form players in attack, midfield, and defence in the 26-player squad,” said Brazil fan Sohag.

“We have every reason to be hopeful that Argentina will win this time. Since Argentina are unbeaten in their last 36 matches, they will begin their World Cup campaign as favourites. I have never seen an Argentina team play as aggressively as the current one, with Messi, Di Maria in sublime form,” said Argentina fan Sayed.