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SPORT




FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar 2022



Qatar press slam 'nightmare start'

AFP, Doha

Qatari media laid into a "weak" performance by the national team on Monday after the hosts' much-heralded World Cup debut ended in a tame 2-0 defeat by Ecuador.

Any buzz from the opening ceremony soon fell flat as Qatar shipped two goals in the first half, with thousands of fans leaving Al Bayt Stadium well before the game had finished.

While Qatar's press praised the opening ceremony, which included US actor Morgan Freeman and a severely disabled Qatari man, they were critical of coach Felix Sanchez's team.

It was a grim evening for Qatar's team, the Asian champions who had been preparing for their big moment for years, backed by no expense-spared facilities and coaching.

"It was always going to be a tall order for Qatar but the manner in which they crumbled against Ecuador would have disappointed the home fans," said the Gulf Times, an English-language daily. "Ecuador — 44th in the FIFA rankings — are only six places above Qatar, but last night they showed they are miles ahead of the Asian champions."

The Qatar Tribune praised the "extraordinary" opening ceremony but lambasted a "nightmare start" by the team.

Al Sharq said fans walked out "because they couldn't bear seeing the loss". But it added: "Fans should support the team in the next game against Senegal until the last moment."

Six-goal England can still improve, says Southgate

AFP, Doha

Gareth Southgate insisted England still have room for improvement after kicking off their World Cup campaign in blistering form with a 6-2 demolition of Iran on Monday.

Southgate's side tore Iran apart in Doha to produce the perfect riposte to critics who claim the England manager is too cautious with his tactics.

Jude Bellingham, 19, opened the scoring and Bukayo Saka, 21, netted twice as England's young guns stole the spotlight.

Saka is the youngest England player to score more than once in a World Cup game, while Bellingham is the second youngest. Three Lions scorer in World Cup history behind Michael Owen.

Raheem Sterling, Marcus Rashford and Jack Grealish also netted for England at Khalifa International Stadium.

While England hit the ground running in their bid to win a first major trophy since the 1966 World Cup, Southgate was frustrated by the way his team twice switched off to allow Mehdi Taremi to bag a brace for Iran.

With tougher Group B tests looming against the United States on Friday and Wales on November 29, Southgate urged his players to keep working on their focus.

"We are really pleased to start in this way. Iran are usually very difficult to score against, so it's a credit to our players, their movement and the quality of their finishing," Southgate said.

"I wasn't pleased with how we finished the game, conceding two goals. We are going to have to be better against the USA because they are going to come at us full throttle."

"I understand the focus drifting a bit but we still have a lot to do to qualify. Of course it is a really good start for us."

Southgate has now won nine matches at major tournaments, surpassing any other England manager.

But in the Southgate era, England were beaten by Croatia in the 2018 World Cup semi-finals before losing the Euro 2020 final to Italy on penalties.

Those near misses, and a run of six games without a win heading into the World Cup, had increased the pressure on Southgate, who was relieved to keep the doubters at bay.

"With the players, we have talked all week about setting the right tone and the right intent. That came with the counter-pressing and the way we mixed our game up," he said.

"It's a great start for us, it's a good platform to build on. There are things we need to be better at if we are going to progress to the latter stages."

Southgate also revealed England defender Harry Maguire felt ill just before he was substituted in the second half, potentially making him a doubt for the United States game.

Meanwhile, Saka said England's victory showed what they can achieve in Qatar.

"We needed that good start. We haven't played the best coming into the tournament. There was a lot of talk and speculation about our form but we showed everyone how much quality we have and what we can do," Saka told the BBC.

"It is amazing to get the win under so much pressure. But we have to be consistent because we have the next game coming up in a few days and we have to win again."

Saka missed the decisive penalty in the agonising Euro final shoot-out loss.

But the 21-year-old has bounced back at club level to help Arsenal top the Premier League and he justified Southgate's call to start him ahead of Manchester City's Phil Foden.

"I feel in a good place. I feel the support and love from the fans, the coaching staff and my teammates," Saka said.

"That is all I need. I feel ready to give 100 percent and I will continue to do that every time I put the shirt on."

Tunisia take aim at Danes

REUTERS, Al Rayyan

Denmark go into their opening World Cup game against Tunisia side on Tuesday in the unusual position of being among Europe's dark horses, in with an outside chance of winning the tournament if they can get everything right in Qatar.

The key group game will be against France, but first they will need to ensure that there are no slip-ups in their opener against the Tunisians.

To ensure the best possible start, the Danes will turn to playmaker Christian Eriksen, who suffered a heart attack at Euro 2020 but who has since made a full recovery. "After he came back, it's been unbelievable. The second he stepped into the pitch for the first time in Amsterdam, playing against Holland, he just took control of the match and scored, and since then, he's just been better and better," coach Kasper Hjulmand told Reuters in a recent interview.

However, although Tunisia's last five World Cup finals appearances have all ended in first-round exits, there is a real belief they can end that run in Qatar.

Coach Jalel Kadri hoped his side could get off to a positive start against the Danes and build momentum in a difficult pool that also contains France and Australia.

"Denmark is among the best squads in

INFO ZONE

DENMARK VS TUNISIA

PLAYERS TO WATCH
Christian Eriksen (Denmark) Caps 117 Goals 39

Hannibal Mejbri (Tunisia) Caps 18 Goals 0

HEAD-TO-HEAD
Matches 1 Denmark 1 Tunisia 0

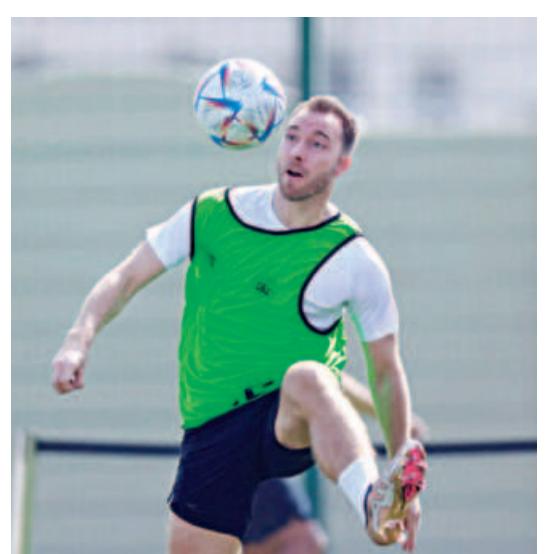
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Europe. We know they have high quality in every department," he said on Monday.

"But we will give our all. We have our strengths, but we also know our weaknesses. We are aware we will be compared to past Tunisia squads."

"In terms of performance, we feel good, we are calm and happy with the results we have achieved. We are representing all Arab nations and we deserve to be here," he said.



All eyes on Mbappe as holders take on Socceroos

REUTERS, Doha

World Cup holders France will need Kylian Mbappe at his best in Qatar following the loss of Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema to injury, coach Didier Deschamps said on Monday.

France begin their defence against Australia on Tuesday as they look to move on from a troubled build-up which saw several players pull out injured such as key midfielders Ngolo Kante and Paul Pogba, forward Christopher Nkunku and centre back Presnel Kimpembe.

The Real Madrid striker succumbed to a



left thigh injury, although he played no part in France's 2018 triumph in Russia when Mbappe burst onto the world stage.

The Paris Saint-Germain striker was just 19 but scored four goals during that World Cup, including one in the 4-2 final win over Croatia.

"He is still a young player, just a bit less than four years ago, but he already did very important things four years ago," Deschamps told reporters in Doha. "Since then he has become more mature

With a spate of injuries throwing a spanner into defending champions France's World Cup plans, the reigning champions will look to hedge their bets on a certain Kylian Mbappe, hoping that the electric forward can come up with the goods and ensure that Les Blues do not allow any thoughts of the 'curse of champions' in their mind.

INFO ZONE

FRANCE VS AUSTRALIA

PLAYERS TO WATCH
Kylian Mbappe Caps 59 Goals 28

Garang Kuol Caps 1 Goals 0

HEAD-TO-HEAD
Matches 5 France 3 Australia 1 Draw 1

and there is now even more recognition for him around the world.

"He doesn't have any more responsibility within the squad than he did before, but he has always had the ability to make the difference and we will need that. He has the ability to be decisive at any moment, unlike many other players."

Mbappe, who turns 24 next month, will lead a French attack in which Olivier Giroud is now expected to start in the absence of Benzema.

If four years ago in Russia Mbappe was still a teenager, he is now an established world-class talent and one of the best-paid athletes on the planet after turning down Real Madrid and agreeing a highly lucrative new contract to stay in Paris earlier this year.

Yet his last major tournament was disappointing, with Mbappe failing to score at Euro 2020 and missing the crucial penalty as France lost to Switzerland in a shoot-out in the last 16.

However, France captain Hugo Lloris insisted: "It is hard to say just how good he can be. He seems focused but also relaxed and he is eager to play well and help the team."

He added that injury setbacks were not going to disrupt their flow. "We still believe in our chances, in our squad. The last minute withdrawals, especially Karim's, did not help. But I want to think that the team will move on. On that level, the first game is always extremely important and as defending champions, the expectations are even higher for us."