

THE LATERAL VIEW

Minnows can dare to dream big

IRESH ZAKER

The 2022 FIFA World Cup is turning out to be quite the edition for the underdogs. After only four days of football, we have already witnessed two major upsets.

A third could have culminated had the Canadians been, for a change, a little less polite. This is perhaps not surprising as football is becoming increasingly globalised, with players from all over the world playing their trade in the big leagues.

Also, technological resources are helping more insular nations such as Saudi Arabia strategise effectively against the traditional superpowers of the sport.

It is refreshing to observe more parity in the sport and if the trend sustains, one can reasonably look forward to the day when a so-called minnow gets their hands on the most coveted trophy.

Before I move on to some off-pitch matters, a tip of the hat goes to Spain for ensuring the average number of goals scored in this edition remains reasonable in spite of Africa's best efforts to the contrary, having contributed none so far.

Three developments caught my eye in the last couple of days. The first one involves the ex-mayor of Chittagong (yes, you have read the name right!) gifting a flat to the Saudi Arabian goalkeeper. Belgium's Thibault Courtois



Switzerland players applaud supporters after a hard-fought 1-0 victory against Cameroon in their Group G opening World Cup match yesterday. [Inset] Cameroon-born Brel Embolo netted the all-important goal but the 25-year-old refused to celebrate as the small group of Swiss fans cheered wildly at Al Janoub Stadium.

PHOTO: AFP

Embolo lifts Swiss to win over country of his birth

AFP, DOHA

Brel Embolo scored against the country of his birth as Switzerland defeated Cameroon 1-0 to make a winning start to their World Cup campaign on Thursday.

Embolo struck three minutes into the second half at Al Janoub Stadium as Switzerland secured a vital three points in a group that includes tournament favourites Brazil and Serbia.

Cameroon have now lost their last eight World Cup matches going back to 2002.

Roger Milla was presented with an award before kick-off as the oldest goalscorer in World Cup history, a reminder of past glories for Cameroon who have won just one game since reaching the quarter-finals 32 years ago.

Cameroon coach Rigobert Song, who played at four World Cups including with a 42-year-old Milla in 1994, opted for the in-form Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting to lead the attack in place of usual captain Vincent Aboubakar.

African teams had made an encouraging start in Qatar after all five failed to get past the group stage in 2018, but Cameroon will regret not making more of a first half they controlled.

Bryan Mbeumo fired at Yann Sommer after a superb ball through from Martin Hongla before Karl Toko Ekambi lashed over the rebound.

Sommer then got down low to save from Choupo-Moting after he pinched the ball away from Manuel Akanji, although a questionable foul was given against the Bayern Munich striker.

Silvan Widmer made a vital challenge to stop Toko Ekambi turning in a cross from Collins Fai and Sommer pushed away a weak effort by Hongla.

Akanji glanced wide at a corner as Cameroon switched off on the stroke of half-time but there was no such escape when they were again caught napping at the start of the second half.

Granit Xhaka and Remo Freuler worked the ball out wide on the right to Xherdan Shaqiri whose low cross into the area was swept home by an unmarked Embolo, who chose not to celebrate against his birth country.

Choupo-Moting neatly weaved his way past a couple of defenders in the box but couldn't beat Sommer from a tight angle.

Andre Onana kept Cameroon in the game with a brilliant stop to deny Ruben Vargas who found himself completely free in an almost carbon copy of Embolo's goal.

Only a desperate block prevented Haris Seferovic from adding a late second.

Song said the rankings meant nothing coming into the tournament, but Cameroon's eighth World Cup appearance risks being brief with games to come against Serbia and Brazil.



Shakib returns for India ODIs

SPORTS REPORTER

Ace Bangladesh all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan, who had skipped the Tigers' last ODI series -- against Zimbabwe in August -- returned to the squad along with paceman Ebadot Hossain for the three-match ODI series against India next month.

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) announced a 16-member squad for the series, slated to begin on December 4 at the Sher-e-Bangla National Stadium in Mirpur.

Although all the regular players from the ODI setup had made the cut, Mosaddek Hossain and Shoriful Islam failed to get the selectors' nod. Spinner Taijful Islam, who had also featured in the Tigers' ODI squad during the tour of Zimbabwe this year, has been left out.

The Tigers, led by Tamim Iqbal, will play the second match also in Mirpur on December 7 before playing the final match in Chattogram on December 10. All the one-day matches will be day-night affairs beginning from 12 PM Bangladesh Time.

SQUAD: Tamim Iqbal (Captain), Liton Das, Anamul Haque Bijoy, Shakib Al Hasan, Mushfiqur Rahim, Afif Hossain, Yasir Ali, Mehedi Hasan Miraz, Mustafizur Rahman, Taskin Ahmed, Hasan Mahmud, Ebadot Hossain, Nasum Ahmed, Mahmudullah Riyad, Najmul Hossain Shanto, Nurul Hasan Sohan.



FOR THE LOVE OF MARADONA

AFP, DOHA

Javier Maluf will quietly put on a shirt worn by Diego Maradona against England, but other fans at the World Cup have more noisy plans for Friday's second anniversary of the death of the flawed genius.

Argentina's legion of supporters may also be praying to the sporting gods that the late football great can still inspire his country to victory over Mexico on Saturday to keep their hopes in Qatar alive.

Maluf is like many Argentina fans who have never fully recovered from Maradona's death from a heart attack at the age of 60.

The shirt that Maradona wore during a game against England at Wembley in 1980 is the prized item in Maluf's collection of 1,000 game-worn football jerseys that he estimates is worth \$1 million.

"I will put it on for a while as a sign of respect," he told AFP at his Doha home, where the shirts and other souvenirs are kept.

"We all know his story but we all know his impact on the game."

A respected memorabilia sleuth, Maluf, 56, also has a blood-stained Argentina shirt worn by Mario Kempes in a 1978 World Cup game against France.

That is folded near a River Plate shirt worn in 1931 by Carlos Peucelle, who played in the first World Cup a year earlier.



Memorabilia is now big business, with Maradona items much sought after.

In May, a shirt worn by the Argentina forward when he scored his infamous 1986 World Cup "Hand of God" goal against England sold at auction for \$9.3 million.

The ball that he fisted into the England net sold this month for £2 million (\$2.4 million).

The shirt is on display at the 3-2-1 Qatar Olympic and Sports Museum during the World Cup but Maluf is among fans who believe that it belongs in Argentina.

"It would be good if it goes to Argentina one day, so that all the public can see it and feel the importance," he said.

More than 30,000 Argentina fans are in Qatar for this year's tournament and while



many worship current number 10 Lionel Messi, Maradona's name still carries an almost mystical force.

PILGRIMAGE

Many have been on a pilgrimage to a giant Maradona mural near the Khalifa stadium in Doha.

At Argentina's first game -- a shock 2-1 defeat by Saudi Arabia -- there were

Maradona masks, banners and shirts on display in the stadium.

And aficionados say there will be many public tributes to Maradona on Friday.

One group plans a march to the Maradona FanFest at Doha's international airport.

The main attraction there is a hologram of the player plus a "tribute jet" bearing images of Maradona that will be auctioned, with a chunk of the proceeds going to charity.

Diego and Churi Veliz went to Monday's game wearing headgear emblazoned with Maradona sitting on a camel. They took countless selfies with Arab football fans.

Gonzalo, a 32-year-old Buenos Aires lawyer, recalled the shock of finding out about Maradona's death.

"I was on the beach, my girlfriend told me and I said we had to grab our things and go straight back to Buenos Aires." They were among thousands who waited outside Maradona's house.

Claudio carried a flag showing Maradona embracing Messi, which will be seen again when Argentina take on Mexico.

Laura Valero, who borrowed \$8,000 to make the trip to Qatar, said she was "recovering" from the defeat.

"I will be wearing a Maradona shirt because you have to believe in something," she said of the looming anniversary and game.