



THE LATERAL VIEW

Minnows can dare to dream big

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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 plying 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 scored none in first four games.

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



Cristiano Ronaldo started yet another World Cup by breaking a record as the star Portuguese forward became the first player ever to score in five World Cups after netting in his side's 3-2 win over Ghana in their Group H encounter on Thursday. Ronaldo had started the 2018 World Cup in Russia by becoming the oldest player, at 33 years and 130 days, to score a hatrick.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Record-smasher Ronaldo gets Portugal going

AFP, Doha

Cristiano Ronaldo became the first man to score at five World Cups on Thursday when he scored the opening goal from the penalty spot in Portugal's 3-2 win over Ghana.

The 37-year-old set the record when he smashed home his spot-kick in the 65th minute at the 974 Stadium in Doha to send Fernando Santos' team to a victory which moved them top of Group H, two points ahead of Uruguay and South Korea.

Joao Felix and rising star Rafael Leao made sure of the win after Andre Ayew's leveller had briefly threatened to ruin Ronaldo's party.

Osman Bukari netted in the final minute for Ghana but the tournament's lowest-ranked side couldn't pull off a shock and sit bottom of the group.

Ronaldo overtakes Pele and Germans Uwe Seeler and Miroslav Klose, who all scored in four World Cups, after being brought down by Mohammed Salisu and taking the penalty himself.

Manchester United announced this week that Ronaldo will leave with immediate effect after he criticised the club and manager Erik ten Hag in a TV interview, but he has showed no signs of strain from the bitter end to his time at Old Trafford.

All the attention pre-match was on Ronaldo and

whether he could break the record and he had the perfect chance to do so in the 10th minute.

Mohammed Kudus gave the ball away sloppily in midfield and Otavio slipped Ronaldo through, only for the once clinical finisher to miscontrol the pass and clatter into Ghana goalkeeper Lawrence Ati Zigi as he tried to poke home.

And shortly afterwards Ronaldo headed Raphael Guerreiro's deep cross wide from close range, a chance that in his prime he would have been almost guaranteed to score.

He did have the ball in the net just after the half-hour mark when it dropped to him in the area, but he was harshly judged by referee Ismail Elfath to have pushed Alexander Djiku before turning and stroking home a classy finish.

Ronaldo was in fact Portugal's only real goal threat against what on paper is Group H's weakest team, who were backed by an enthusiastic set of supporters who put on more of a show in the stands than their workaday players initially did on the pitch. However Felix and Leao made sure Portugal would take the points with two lovely finishes in as many minutes, both strikes set up by Ronaldo's former United teammate Bruno Fernandes.

Bukari then imitated Ronaldo with his goal celebration after heading home completely unmarked, but Portugal held out for a big win on a historic day.



Embolo lifts Swiss to win over country of his birth

AFP, Doha

Breel 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.



was the latest to complain about how goalkeepers keep drawing the short straw when big awards are given out, and so one cannot fault the mayor's decision, at least as far as regarding which position to reward.

Then comes the European fans, and particularly the English ones, who continue to complain about the shortage of alcohol in Qatar. Apparently, the inability to drunkenly harass other fans inside and outside the stadium really cramps their style, tradition, joie de vivre in general.

And last but not the least, following what was probably the greatest victory in Japan's history, their fans, as is their wont, celebrated partly by cleaning up the stands.

I leave it up to the reader to decide which of the aforementioned three stories best epitomises the spirit of the sport and, indeed, life in general. It is fair to say that each one, in its own way, represents how we celebrate football and life these days.

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.