

## Crunch time closing in

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week alongside Richarlison's acrobatic goal and the winners struck by Saudi Arabia and Japan against Argentina and Germany, respectively.

From goals to goal-scorers, precisely the two greatest of all time playing what could most possibly be their last World Cups, Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have opened their mark and for their sides', albeit through spot-kicks.

While Ronaldo created yet another world record -- this time becoming the first player to score in five World Cups -- Messi had broken a national record -- of scoring in four editions of the showpiece event. The two talismans are obviously past their prime, but they appear to still possess the Midas Touch to conjure match-decisive moments out of nowhere, ones that would forever

be instilled in World Cup highlight reel.

We are yet to see direct free-kick goals though, but it is a bit too much to expect all variety of strikes this early in the competition. Having said that, the free-kick specialists out there in Doha could still be far from fully adjusting to the Al-Rihla, the new-and-improved match-ball featuring for the first time in Qatar.

And great for entertainment value, it is interesting that 63 per cent of aforementioned goals have resulted in the second-half. More late comebacks had surfaced and there could have been one more on Thursday -- and the one that had all the potential to be the talking point of the week -- had Ghana's forward not slipped after intercepting the ball which Portugal goalie rolled out while being unaware of Inaki Williams lurking behind

his back.

However, witnessing fewer first-half goals, one cannot blame teams for adopting a more cautious approach, banking on coaches' assessment during half-time tactical briefs and pep-talks, as players try to rediscover peak chemistry right after just days of being involved in demanding club football fixtures.

Looking ahead into the group stage's second round of matches, it is almost a virtual knockout for former champions Germany and Argentina, even though a draw would keep them alive in the tournament. However, the Albiceleste would not want to qualify as runners-up from their group as it would likely place them in the Round of 16 against defending champions France, who have looked sharp in attack against Australia -- sharp enough to top their group and

rip apart a defence that Argentines featured against the Saudis.

Disparity among teams is apparently dissolving with the Asians having impressed so far. The latest with Iran recovering from a 6-2 drubbing against England to beat Wales 2-0, a day after South Korea went neck-to-neck against a South American powerhouse in Uruguay and Japan, of course, with their shocking victory over four-time champions Germany. And from Africa, Ghana have impressed the most in their 3-2 thriller against Portugal as they broke the deadlock for the African nations in this World Cup.

A lot will be clear in the forthcoming week, in terms of predictive abilities, as the top guns look to impose their playing style and make life as less difficult as possible in the third and final round of the group.

## Bangladesh has learnt a lot from Sri Lanka's woes

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Bangladesh and Sri Lanka must work together and come out with a stronger policy for freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean so that the countries are not bullied or sidelined or forced to take sides.

TDS: But, regional organisations like Saarc and BIMSTEC are not effectively working.

**Sabri:** Yes. Look at the European Union, North America and East Asia -- all developed as regions. South Asia has failed to reap the benefits. Within

South Asia, we are not working as a team. When you work as a team, you need to have trust and work on similarities rather than focusing on differences. Unfortunately, some of the big powers in the region are not seeing eye to eye and that has

affected all of us. I hope India and Pakistan will sit together and restart Saarc in a pragmatic manner. Otherwise, we will be forced to take other options that are available outside our region. That's not good for all of us.

## Qatar crash out, Iran stay alive

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incensed not to be awarded a penalty after he was bundled over by Sarr.

Senegal looked like they would head into half-time without managing to break down Qatar's resistance, only for the hosts to gift them a goal in the 41st minute.

Qatari defender Boualem Koukhi fluffed a clearance to leave Dia to pounce on the loose ball and fire it past Barsham.

Senegal doubled their lead almost immediately after the break when Diedhiou glanced home a header at the near post from a corner.

Senegal goalkeeper Edouard Mendy was rooted

to his line when Muntari pulled one back for Qatar, powerfully heading home Mohamad's cross to haul the hosts back into it.

The goal lifted the crowd and sent Qatar surging forward in search of another, but Dieng nipped the revival in the bud in the 84th minute when he swept the ball home for Senegal's third.

In the first match of the day, Iran claimed a famous 2-0 victory over 10-man Wales as Carlos Queiroz's men scored two goals deep into added time to keep their World Cup campaign alive.

The Iran players, who sang the national anthem

before kick-off, sent their thousands of supporters at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium delirious as they celebrated beating a European team at a World Cup for the first time.

Wales goalkeeper Wayne Hennessey became the first player to be sent off at the Qatar tournament for clattering into Mehdi Taremi late in the game.

Iran, who had earlier twice struck the woodwork, finally broke the deadlock in the 98th minute through substitute Rouzbeh Cheshmi's powerful drive.

Ramin Rezaeian clipped in a second on the counter-attack three minutes later.

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