



IMMUTABLE AND UNIGNORABLE: Our passion for football and festivity

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ATIQUE ANAM

Having been a bit lukewarm to the FIFA World Cup thus far for not having my favourite team at this edition in Qatar, I was kind of sucked into the excitement of it all a fair two days after the Greatest Show on Earth began. It was the Argentina versus Saudi Arabia match on Tuesday which once again reminded me of football's power to get people imbued despite the daily grind.

I walked out of my home for office, a little later than usual after having completed my online chores, just as Saudi Arabia cancelled Lionel Messi's 10th minute spot-kick. From whatever I had observed of the first-half action, I thought the equaliser must have been an odd moment of brilliance from an unfancied Saudi team. But as I ventured through the unusually quiet alleys of Dhaka, I began to question my conclusion.

There were very few vehicles on the streets, and whatever people there were that day were buzzing in front of shops which had a television hung up somewhere on the wall.



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From the collective gasps of the people, I gathered that things were not going as everyone had expected. I tried my best to decipher the scoreline from the distance, but to no avail. I had used up my mobile data, so I got it recharged and was as dumbfounded as everyone else. The Saudis had taken the lead! Saudis, often considered as the punching bags of the World Cup, were winning against a side who were threatening to register a record for the longest unbeaten streak! Crazy!

There was still a bit of time left for Argentina to equalise or even regain the lead, I felt, given the magical abilities of Lionel Messi. But my assumption was soon dispelled, when stuck in traffic, I saw a middle-aged street vendor hurl expletives at his mate about the losing team, visibly out of frustration. He might have already had a rough day like most street vendors do, haggling with customers from dawn to dusk, but his day got worse – his expression said as much – as his team of stars got beaten in their very first test. There was absolute disbelief on the faces of people, as if the party they had been anticipating for four years had just been spoiled.

Once I reached office, I was met with a bunch of colleagues clad in the sky blue and white, faking smiles through pain and some



others clad in bright yellow poking fun at them. All in good spirits though.

Zia was one of those wearing his favourite Albiceleste jersey which he brings out of his wardrobe every four years in hope that the modern-day messiah of Argentina would help him revisit his first memories of World Cup – a very young Zia, unbeknownst of the intricacies of the game, cheering with his father as Diego Maradona bedazzled the world with his trickery in Mexico '86.

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Those were days of heavy load-shedding and



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED/MINTU DESHWARA

monochrome televisions slowly giving way to colour ones. Times have changed, technology has advanced through leaps and bounds and people have found new mediums to express their emotions, but the passion and craze that football invokes in fans every four years seem to have remained the same.

Shabab is another of my colleagues, a much younger one and one who admittedly grew up on a heavy dose of European club football, more specifically of the English Premier League. He has been grinning from ear to ear since England beat Iran 6-2. Unlike Zia, Shabab has never seen his favourite team lift any global or continental title, yet he dreams, like most optimistic England fans, that his long wait will end one day and erase the painful memory of Frank Lampard's infamous disallowed goal against Germany in 2010. Gareth Southgate's men reached the last four in Russia four years ago and went one better in the Euros last year. No harm in dreaming for the ultimate glory in Qatar, Shabab quips.

I have often wondered what makes us Bangladeshis act so passionately over a sport which many of us so carefully keep away from our conscience for the best part of four years. I have asked myself why someone would paint their house in the tricolours of the European nations who had colonised much of the world for centuries, or why people would put hundreds of yards of clothes together to show support for countries that are geographically and culturally poles apart.

While I have failed to find any definitive answer to these questions, my best guess is that, as passionate people, we enjoy expressing our emotions with others and feeling part of this global celebration. We may be light-years away from appearing in a World Cup but the event has got so ingrained in our collective conscience, that we own it like anyone else in the world. And then of course the respite this one month of football festivity brings from the harsh reality, especially in these difficult times, makes it so precious and rewarding.

‘Excitement over if Argentina not in title race’

Anisur Rahman Zico, the first-choice goalkeeper of Bangladesh football team as well as Bashundhara Kings, has been managing time to watch matches of the Qatar World Cup amid his club side's involvement in the ongoing Independence Cup. The 25-year-old goalkeeper talked to the Daily Star's Anisur Rahman about the ongoing showpiece event among other things.

The Daily Star (DS): How do you see the craze of the FIFA World Cup as a footballer?

Anisur Rahman Zico (ARZ): Even though some good teams were eliminated from the qualifying round, the excitement is the same for everyone all over the world as the World Cup arrives every four years. Fans in our country, not only the Brazil and Argentina ones but the fans from Germany and other nations as well, remain excited to watch and enjoy the World Cup matches for nearly one month. I think the World Cup means a festival in Bangladesh.

DS: How has the World Cup celebration changed from your childhood days to present?

ARZ: I started watching the World Cup from 2002, but I started understanding it from 2006. During my childhood, there was hardly any good arrangement to watch the World Cup, with fear of power cut during the match time, but I always remained excited to watch it with my friends and family members. This time around, though I can't even watch all the World Cup matches due to my professional commitment at the club level, I'd say, watching the World Cup during childhood was much more exciting.

DS: How is the environment at the club when you watch a game together?

ARZ: We really enjoy watching the World Cup matches together at the club tent, all footballers gather under one roof when a match features either Brazil or Argentina. Except for the Brazil or Argentina match, we watch the World Cup matches in small groups at the club but the excitement reaches a peak when Brazil or Argentina play. We tend to engage in banter to enjoy ourselves fully.

DS: How do you evaluate the ongoing World Cup till present? Who are now favourites?

ARZ: A lot of changes have come in football due to the involvement of technologies, so every team know their opponents' details – including technique, tactic, weakness, strength, and many other things. From the start I predicted Brazil and Argentina as favourites but what happened in the World Cup till date, I think it is going to be a World Cup of upsets with no clear favourites.

Look, Japan beat Germany, Saudi Arabia beat Argentina and Morocco held Croatia, so it is really tough to predict who is eventually going to be the champion.

DS: How has the performance of goalkeepers been so far?

ARZ: At a big stage like the World Cup, teams will have better chances to win if their goalkeepers make some good saves during the match. Saudi Arabia won their match because of their goalkeeper who was even adjudged the player-of-the-match, and so was Japan's goalkeeper.

I think the goalkeepers of minnows are really performing well. I think if Iran had their number one goalkeeper in the match, then they would not have conceded so many goals against England.

DS: How did you start supporting Brazil, who do you think will go far in the World Cup?

ARZ: I first watched the 2002 World Cup, during which I was much enthralled with the performance and dribbling of Brazilian players like Ronaldinho, Kaka, Ronaldo, and others. Brazil also became champions in that edition. So, I started supporting Brazil, who won their matches easily.

Despite the upsets in the World Cup so far, I still believe Brazil have good chances to go to the final though they may face a bit of problems with their backline.

DS: Bangladesh is virtually divided into two groups – Brazil and Argentina. How did you take the beginning of Argentina in the World Cup?

ARZ: Initially I felt happy with the defeat of Argentina, but later I felt Argentina should stay in the race. And though we had a lot of fun with Argentina supporters after the defeat, all excitement will be over if there is no Argentina in the title race, and the World Cup will lose its attraction.

DS: Despite all the passion for football in the country, why is Bangladesh football lagging so far behind?

ARZ: Football is loved globally and likewise in Bangladesh. Our people are not only crazy about Maradona, Pele, Neymar, Messi, Ronaldo but they also support different teams. Unfortunately, we can't qualify for the World Cup because we have not met the necessary standard as we don't have the facilities to go forward.

