



THE LATERAL VIEW

## Neymar crucial to Brazil's Hexa mission

IRESH ZAKER

When the book is closed on the current generation of footballers, no individual player will have generated greater debate than Neymar. Very few who have a modicum of understanding about football would dispute his talent. Yet, in spite of scoring over a hundred goals for three separate clubs and being two goals shy of becoming Brazil's all-time leading scorer, many feel that he doesn't always apply himself fully to the sport.

Many cannot forgive him for not being able to cement his place alongside Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo as one of the three greatest players of his generation. Many criticise his theatrics after being fouled, and his penchant for 'diving'. I am not sure which side of the debate I am on or whether I care enough to get into the debate to begin with.

What I am sure about after watching Monday night's game, however, is that, despite protestations from many Selecao fans and detractors to the contrary, Brazil need Neymar back if they are to go the distance in this tournament. Regardless of what the real and pseudo pundits say, the opposition cannot afford to ignore Neymar when he is on the pitch. This allows his teammates to express themselves fully, and Brazil to play a more effective and exciting brand of football.

I have to admit that I was a little harsh on the African teams for their failure to score in the beginning of the tournament. It is safe to say that any concerns that I may have had on that front have been decisively alleviated by the boys from Morocco, Ghana, and Cameroon. I do hope that one of these teams make a deep run in Qatar. Given the abundance of talent in Africa, it is sad that no team from the continent has ever made it past the quarterfinals in the World Cup.

Meanwhile, the Asian drought threatens to continue. Who would have thought after Iran's four-goal defeat against England that they would be best poised to progress among all the nations from our continent? But here we are. It all hangs on their encounter with the USA - a fixture made fascinating by an abundance of stories, both on and off the field.



Just two minutes after conceding an equaliser that would have allowed Ecuador to leapfrog them and advance to the last 16, Senegal captain Kalidou Koulibaly willed his side into the next round by slotting home a sublime volley to ensure a 2-1 win. They become just the fifth African side to qualify for the last 16 this millennium.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Koulibaly fires emotional Senegal into last 16

REUTERS, Doha

Winger Ismaila Sarr kept his cool to score a first half penalty and captain Kalidou Koulibaly netted a second goal as Senegal beat Ecuador 2-1 at the Khalifa International Stadium on Tuesday to earn a place in the last 16 of the World Cup.

Sarr scored his penalty in the 44th minute having earned the spot-kick himself, but Ecuador, who needed only a draw to reach the knockout rounds, equalised through Moises Caicedo.

In Senegal's capital Dakar, joyous crowds celebrated as cheers and car horns rang out in gridlocked streets afterwards. "IMMENSE! What a match! What players!" Senegal President Macky Sall said on Twitter. "Now go and touch the stars."

Meanwhile, Ecuador's players slumped to the turf in tears on the final whistle but in truth they were second best on the night.

Senegal dedicated their win to the memory of midfielder Papa Bouba Diop, goalscorer

when they claimed a shock 1-0 win against France in 2002, and who passed away aged 42 two years ago to the day. Koulibaly also paid tribute by having Diop's number 19 written on his captain's armband.

"Today is the (anniversary) of

play in his honour, this wasn't something we were going to let slip."

The beating of African drums was constant, as was the effort and endeavour of Senegal, who dominated the opening period against an opponent happy to sit on the

first game, many thought we were going out, but we wanted to do something big here. We always believed that we would qualify for the round of 16."

"It is a hard blow. It is a big frustration that we are feeling," Ecuador coach Gustavo Alfaro said. "Unfortunately we made mistakes in the decisive match. And this leaves us with a bad feeling because we wanted to go through and stay on this road we had been following."

"The pain that we all feel right now is a huge pain. Unfortunately we were knocked out of a beautiful dream that these guys were building in the last two years. But we need to take into account the good performances we had and take that into the future."

Senegal will now want to at least match their quarterfinal finish in 2002, when current coach Aliou Cisse was team captain. He added: "The players flew the flag high today and now we are an African team going to the Round of 16. Football is an emotional game, it is a beautiful game."

his death, I will give (his family) the trophy in his honour," Koulibaly told reporters. We knew the anniversary of his death was something very important, for his family. We wanted to pay homage to him. He made me dream when I was a boy. We knew we wanted to

point they needed.

"This was a special day for Senegal, all Senegalese football won today," Koulibaly said on television after the game. "I'm glad I scored this goal, it's a huge honour for me. If we were defeated, it would have been a big loss. After the



## Fernandes steps out of Ronaldo's shadow

REUTERS, Lusail

Portugal's Bruno Fernandes has long played second fiddle to team mate Cristiano Ronaldo but on Monday he stepped out of the superstar's shadow by scoring two goals to steer his team past Uruguay and into the World Cup Round of 16.

The 28-year-old's career has been inextricably linked to Ronaldo, having played for Sporting, the club where his Portugal captain started his illustrious career before moving on to bigger things.

He then moved to Manchester United in 2020, another club where CR7 had left his mark in the past. Having developed into a key player for the English side, the Fernandes then saw Ronaldo return last year to once again hog the spotlight.

Fernandes does not possess the speed, power or goal-scoring prowess of CR7 but he did what was needed to get Portugal through in a game where Ronaldo failed to get on the score sheet.

Fernandes' whipped cross flew past Ronaldo's head and into the back of the net even though his more celebrated team mate initially claimed the goal for himself.

He then added another with a second half stoppage time penalty



before rattling the post seconds later in his attempt for a hat-trick.

The biggest cheers throughout the game were reserved exclusively for Ronaldo from the fans in the 88,000 capacity Lusail stadium.

Fernandes, however, left the pitch a happy man, knowing on the biggest of stages there were now two big names in the Portuguese squad.

Playing in his second World Cup, compared to Ronaldo's fifth, Fernandes will be hoping it will also be Portugal's most successful one.

Fernandes also warned that Portugal would have to be at their best in their final group match on Friday against South Korea, with a point enough to guarantee them top spot in Group H.

"We know we will find a very organised team in front of us with a huge skill-set, as we've seen in their last matches," added Fernandes.

"We've played at different times and that has allowed us to watch South Korea play. Our objective is to win every match, and we have one ahead of us."

## We never set any targets, Qatar coach says after meek exit

AFP, Al Khor

Qatar coach Felix Sanchez said on Tuesday his team were never targeting a place in the knockout phase after defeat by the Netherlands left the hosts without a point in the World Cup.

The home side finished rock bottom of Group A after a 2-0 loss at the Al Bayt Stadium, having already joined South Africa in 2010 as the only hosts to be dumped out at the first hurdle.

"We're a country with 6,000 football licences so this was a likely situation," said Sanchez when asked if he ever thought Qatar would get through the group.

"We never thought at any time to set a target of reaching the last 16 or the quarter-finals."

"We just wanted to come here and see what we could do. We managed to play two good games against Senegal and the Netherlands. The first game (against Ecuador) we weren't at our usual level and we know that."

"You can use statistics how you want but we need to make our own assessments." Qatar came into the tournament as continental champions after winning the 2019 Asian Cup, but never seriously threatened to pull off any surprise results.

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Sanchez, who has been in charge since 2017, said he would wait to decide whether or not to stay on as coach.

"I'm not sure about my future to be honest... We just have to reflect on this. We haven't thought anything in particular about the future."

The Oranje will next take on the second placed team from Group B for a quarter-final spot at the Khalifa International Stadium on Saturday.

"We got into the next phase - the most important part of the tournament - with positivity. We did what we needed to do," said Netherlands coach Van Gaal. "We're group winners and we'll most likely be playing a number two team, probably USA or Iran, and they're playing tonight and we can watch them tonight."

But as reporters one after another criticised the performance against Qatar, Van Gaal hit back.

"Well that's disappointing, but I don't agree with you. I think everyone would be rather proud to advance to the next round. I think things are not as bad as you say they are," Van Gaal said.

Van Gaal also added that Gakpo, who plays his club football for PSV Eindhoven, had the potential to be a "really great player" and was learning to play in a more central attacking role than his initial preference on the left.

But Van Gaal chose to highlight the role of Memphis Depay and Marten de Roon who he included in his squad for the World Cup even though they were not fully fit at the time of the announcement. Both players started in Tuesday's win. "I am so pleased I took that decision because both of them are able to play now," he said.

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