

THE LATERAL VIEW

Fearful of impending chaos

IRESH ZAKER

Iran became the latest Asian country to exit the World Cup 2022, and I have to say that things are not looking good for our continent. Technically speaking, Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia could all qualify beyond the group stage. However, in their respective fixtures, Japan and South Korea would have to beat Spain and Portugal, two teams that are fairly on top of their game right now. It will not be, to put it very mildly, easy.

Saudi Arabia's qualification picture is less daunting but poses its own set of challenges, but I will not delve into the various permutations. Suffice to say that if Saudi Arabia were to go through to the second round, it would most likely be at Argentina's expense.

The aforementioned challenges arise mostly because we live in Bangladesh. As we are all painfully or happily aware of, there are many Argentina fans in this country. Argentina's failure to go past the first round would thus likely trigger mass heartbreak and hysteria.

My friend, Nazim Farhan Chowdhury, provided the fol-



lowing calculations. It may be a little simplistic, but I don't think it is that far off the mark. With Bangladesh's population being 170 million and assuming that at least eighty per cent of our people follow the World Cup, it would mean that there are 136 million football fans in the country. Now, assuming at least 45 per cent of the 136 million support Argentina, it implies we have 61 million Albiceleste supporters in Bangladesh.

Not quiet and casual supporters mind you, rather 61 million loudly passionate fans. Compare that to Argentina's total population of 46 million, you understand why we are becoming globally famous as a World Cup crazy nation, and why a bad end to Argentina's run makes me gravely concerned.



Now a word in the defence of my people -- by my people, I mean the proud and slightly energetic men and women of my home district Brahmanbaria. It seems to me that every time there is a contentious situation in the sporting world, especially relating to a Brazil or Argentina game, some people take great pleasure in contemplating the duress that the Superintendent of Police in Brahmanbaria must be under.

To these people I say, look at what happened in Brussels after the Morocco game. To these people I say, look at how well behaved we have been through the first round of World Cup 2022. To my people I say, regardless of what happened last night, please keep things under control and let the naysayers worry about the SP of Brussels from here on instead.



After 34 games, finally the free-kick deadlock was broken in the ongoing World Cup during England's match against Wales on Tuesday as Marcus Rashford brilliantly curled Al Rihla into the top-right corner from 20 yards, giving his side the crucial lead. The 25-year-old striker became the third English player, following David Beckham and Kieran Trippier, to score from a direct free-kick in a World Cup since England won the 1966 edition.

PHOTO: REUTERS

‘Football gods bless those who score’

REUTERS, Doha

Iran coach Carlos Queiroz said his team deserved at least a draw against the United States after their 1-0 defeat on Tuesday was enough to end the side's dreams at the World Cup.

Iran needed at least a draw in the Group B clash to have a chance of reaching the knockout stages, but the United States won through Christian Pulisic's goal seven minutes before halftime to go through and play the Netherlands in the last 16.

“Football gods bless those who score goals, and unfortunately we didn't score,” Queiroz told a news conference.

“I said before the match that the United States were the most consistent team in the first two games,” he added, referring to their draws with Wales and England, who qualified as group winners after beating the Welsh 3-0.

“The United States started the match as they did against Wales and England, and they were better than us, more ferocious and faster, and scored a goal, and I was not surprised by that.

“But in the second half the situation changed and we took possession of the ball and created more chances than the United States did in the first half and we deserved to score at least a goal.

“The United States players have the speed and if I

may say when you play against Ferraris you need to close the highway, and that's what we did after the break and we were the better team.”

The Portuguese coach praised his players for their commitment and efforts in training and matches.

“We train in an atmosphere that is not comparable to other teams, but when I work with the players on a daily basis they show enthusiasm and desire to represent Iran,” he said.

Queiroz, who returned to coach Iran for a second stint last September, declined to talk about the last play of the match in which Iran's players demanded a penalty.

Striker Mehdi Taremi went down in the area as defender Cameron Carter-Vickers tried to stop him and Iran's players surrounded the referee but their protests were waved away.

“I have not seen a replay of it yet, but talking about it now is senseless, the United States reached the last 16, and this will not change anything. Life will go on and there are other matches to come.

“I said before in 2018 that I had previously coached many clubs and national teams, but I have never seen in my career players who give everything and get nothing in return like the Iranian players.

“Sometimes football is not fair, and we will come back stronger and have succeeded in gaining the respect of the whole world,” he added.



Valencia makes tearful apology to Ecuador

REUTERS, Doha

Ecuador's veteran captain Enner Valencia could not control his tears as he apologised to his country for the side's failure to reach the knockout stages of the World Cup in Qatar.

But Valencia, whose team came agonisingly close to reaching the last 16 and matching Ecuador's previous best showing in 2006, was quickly consoled by fans who hailed “La Tri” (The Tricolour) for inspiring them with excellent performances.

“We offer an apology to all of Ecuador,” Valencia said, crying in the aftermath of Tuesday's 2-1 defeat to African champions Senegal which stopped them from progressing.

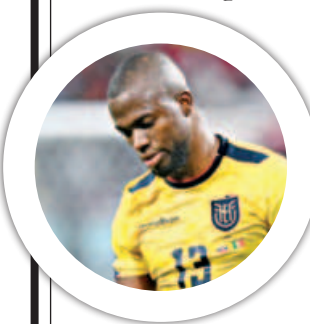
“We didn't expect this, we were very happy with what we were doing ... Unfortunately we could not meet Ecuador's expectations,” he added.

The 33-year-old remains a hero at home, however.

Ecuador's all-time top scorer bagged three goals in a 2-0 opening win over Qatar and a 1-1 draw against Netherlands when they deserved to win and secure passage to the knockout stage.

A draw would have done against Senegal, but Ecuador paid for two lapses in concentration to give away a penalty and then a second goal straight after the euphoria of pulling back to 1-1.

“Unfortunately that's football, it bites you,” said defender Angel Preciado. “We're so sorry not to go through and we thank our nation for their wholehearted support.”



Defenders clamp down in Qatar

REUTERS, Doha

A high number of 0-0 draws in the group stage of the Qatar World Cup has seen playmakers squeezed out by defensive solidity and organisation, closing down the spaces that the world's most creative players usually thrive in.

The four scoreless draws in the first 16 games in Qatar quickly eclipsed the one such stalemate in the group stage in Russia in 2018, as teams string five men across the back to protect themselves from the likes of Argentina's Leo Messi, Croatia's Luka Modric and Denmark's Christian Eriksen.

“There's a lot of teams out there who are saying, ‘We're not going to lose this game, we're going to have to put in a very solid defensive structure’. Those playmakers generally need that space,” former Australia international Alex Tobin told Reuters.

“They need those sort of areas to play into, and they haven't had a lot of space here.”

Tobin has plenty of experience in facing down the world's best number 10s. He faced off against

Diego Maradona in the OFC-CONMEBOL playoff for the 1994 World Cup, which the Argentines won 2-1 on aggregate.

“Maradona was the one where you could just say, ‘I just can't take anything for granted’, because the guy will do something that you just can't predict,” the former centre-back who won 87 caps for the Socceroos recalled.

“There were moments where I thought like a regular defender, ‘Well, that player can't do that’. And then I actually visually thought, no, that's Maradona, so I have to defend in a different way.”

UNDERDOG TACTICS

That Australia side almost upset one of the world's soccer superpowers using exactly the kind of tactics that the underdogs in Qatar have been deploying to great effect.

“I think it would be fair to say that the vast majority of teams have set up their stall with a very strong defensive structure,” Tobin explained.

“Yes, they want to score goals, they want to go forward and so on, but they don't want to take



too many risks to bring in the ball-players, the creative players, attacking midfielders and strikers who can do the damage down the other end.”

Asked if he feared skill more than speed in his playing days, Tobin was unequivocal.

“Definitely speed... If I thought somebody was one metre faster

than me, I was always defending from 1.1 metre away, just so that I knew that the ball over the top was something I could deal with.”

Australia got a taste of the