

Croatia to stay vigilant against misfiring Belgium

REUTERS

Rumours of Belgium's demise are greatly exaggerated, Croatia's head coach Zlatko Dalic said as he prepares his side for Thursday's decisive Group F showdown.

Croatia, who beat Belgium in the 2018 semi-finals, need just a point to guarantee progress to the last 16 while FIFA second-ranked side Belgium almost certainly need to win.

A shock 2-0 defeat by Morocco on Sunday was followed by talk of rifts in the Belgium camp, with playmaker Kevin de Bruyne and defender Jan Vertonghen reportedly at loggerheads.

Belgium manager Roberto Martinez said pressure had gotten the best of his players after they finished third in 2018. He said they were now focused on enjoying their match and playing fearlessly against the 2018 runners-up.

"Every player was fearful of losing. We are not expected to lose... Tomorrow there is no doubt. A draw and we are out."



De Bruyne was also reported to have said that Belgium's so-called Golden Generation is now too old to win the World Cup, but Dalic was having none of it when asked on Wednesday.

"We are playing against the second-best football team in the world and they were number one," he told reporters.

Dalic has ruled out any notion that Croatia would be happy to play for a draw.

"Belgium are a top team, they have De Bruyne and Hazard and we will not be fooled by media stories and some rumours. We are expecting the best of Belgium, a top-notch national team," he said.

Croatia drew with Tunisia in their opener but hit top form in a 4-1 defeat of Canada, leaving them in good shape going in to the clash at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.

"We'll show our true face, the face we demonstrated against Canada," said Croatia midfielder Mateo Kovacic.

CROATIA VS BELGIUM		
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH	
	Mateo Kovacic (Croatia)	Kevin De Bruyne (Belgium)
	Caps 86	Caps 96
	Goals 3	Goals 25
Matches 8		
Croatia 3		
Belgium 3		
Draw 2		



PHOTO: REUTERS

The striker question has long haunted Germany, but after Niclas Füllkrug's goal against Spain at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, an answer appears to have been delivered. While that might be bad news for Thomas Müller -- the highest-scorer in World Cup history among active participants -- he was in high spirits ahead of their pivotal final group game against Costa Rica.

'Humble' Germany's last-chance saloon

AFP

Germany veteran Thomas Müller said his side would "stay humble" with their World Cup group stage exit in 2018 fresh in their minds ahead of Thursday's must-win clash with Costa Rica.

Niclas Füllkrug's 83rd-minute equaliser against Spain on Sunday put Germany's challenge back on track after a damaging opening defeat to Japan.

Germany's hopes of qualifying for the last 16 in Qatar are not entirely in their hands even if they defeat underdogs Costa Rica.

A win for Japan against the Spanish in the simultaneous game would mean Germany must outdo Spain's goal difference, which has been heavily boosted by La Roja's 7-0 annihilation of the Costa Ricans in their opening fixture.

Müller said however he was just focusing on beating Costa Rica, who bounced back in their second game to beat Japan 1-0.

"When the football world looks at Germany versus Costa Rica, from the outside looking in we are the favourites and it is clear that we should win," Müller said on Tuesday.

"We are staying humble. We have only one point and a minus one goal difference, there's no reason for us to be euphoric."

Müller, 33, refused to confirm whether Qatar would be his final World Cup, but admitted "my mind went there a little after the Japan game".

However, after the Spain result, "the thoughts of this being my last World Cup evaporated."

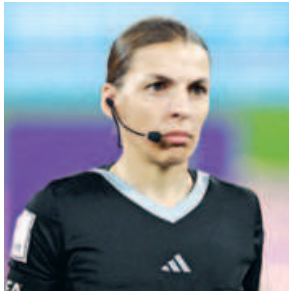
Müller praised Füllkrug's "killer instinct" against Spain, saying he had delivered another "Goetze moment", in reference to Mario Goetze's additional time winner in the 2014 final in the Maracana.

Despite perhaps securing himself a first-ever Germany start against Costa Rica thanks to his late equaliser, late developer Füllkrug said on Tuesday the team needed to "be realistic".



GERMANY VS COSTA RICA			
HEAD-TO-HEAD	Matches 1	Germany 1	Costa Rica 0
PLAYERS TO WATCH	Jamal Musiala (Germany)	Keylor Navas (Costa Rica)	
	Caps 19	Caps 109	
	Goals 1	Clean sheets 42	

WC to see historic all-female refereeing presence



REUTERS

Stephanie Frappart, Neuza Back and Karen Diaz will become the first all-female refereeing team for a men's World Cup match as they have been named to take charge of the Costa Rica-Germany match tonight, FIFA announced on Tuesday.

Frappart, the fourth official for the Poland-Mexico Group C clash last week, will be the main referee as she reaches another milestone after being the first female to officiate at a men's World Cup qualifier in March and Champions League match in 2020.

The 38-year-old Frenchwoman will be joined by Brazilian Neuza and Mexican Diaz as assistants.

Morocco 'hope to fly African flag high'

REUTERS, Al Rayyan

Morocco will play to win against eliminated Canada in their final World Cup Group F match on Thursday to fly the African flag high even though a draw would be enough to send them through, coach Walid Regragui said on Wednesday.

The North Africans are seeking to reach the knockout stage of the World Cup for the first time since 1986.

"It will be like playing a final," Regragui told a news conference. "Canada have nothing to lose. They are already out and it is up to them to hold their heads high. We also have a lot to get out of the game and a lot to lose."

After snatching a goalless draw against 2018 World Cup finalists Croatia, Morocco sealed their first World Cup win in 24 years with a 2-0 victory over Belgium 2-0 on Sunday.

Thursday's opponents Canada are already out of the tournament after losing their two first games, but they will want to leave on a high and record their first ever World Cup victory.

"We are motivated and we know that as long as



the referee does not blow the whistle we have not qualified or achieved anything," Regragui said.

"The most important thing is after the game to move to the next round. We hope to fly the flag of African football high."

If Canada prevail, Morocco will need Belgium to beat Croatia in the other Group F match, with the goal difference determining if they or Croatia advance.

"What we wanted is to be ambassadors of our own destiny and not rely on other results," the coach said.

"It would be an error to go in and give it 20 or 30%. We face a team who want to win it. We are there to win as well. Looking for the draw would be a mistake."

Their victory over Belgium sparked euphoria among players, wild celebrations among fans - and even riots in Brussels.

Regragui called on Morocco fans in Europe to celebrate the result with respect for the country they live in.

"But these (rioters) are not Moroccan people. You need to respect everyone. You can have a party but need to be respectful. I don't like what happened."

CANADA VS MOROCCO		
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH	
	Alphonso Davies (Canada)	Romain Saiss (Morocco)
	Caps 36	Caps 68
	Goals 13	Goals 2
Matches 3		
Canada 0		
Morocco 2		
Draw 1		

Samurai Blue 'must believe in themselves'

AGENCIES

Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu says that European football is the global gold standard but he has urged his players to believe in themselves and suggested a score needs to be settled when they take on Spain in their final Group E match at the World Cup.

The Samurai Blue opened their campaign with a shock win over Germany but were upset in turn by Costa Rica in their second game.

"Tomorrow is going to be a high-pressure game for all players but we must believe in ourselves," Moriyasu told a news conference on Wednesday.

"They must believe in themselves, they must. They must believe in their team mates in order to fight against our opponent. Hopefully, they will be at their best and the result will follow."

A draw could still get Japan through, depending on the result in the Germany-Costa Rica game being played simultaneously, but Moriyasu said his team would be going all out



JAPAN VS SPAIN		
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH	
	Ritsu Doan	Dani Olmo
	(Japan)	(Spain)
	Caps 31	Caps 27
Matches 1	Goals 4	Goals 5
Japan 1		
Spain 0		

for the win at Khalifa International Stadium.

"I hope that the players will play in such a way that they inspire the Japanese people then they keep inspiring other people."

Spain beat a Moriyasu-coached Japan in extra time with a Marco Asensio goal in the semi-finals at the Tokyo Olympics last year, denying the hosts a shot at the gold medal on home soil.

"We were very sorry that happened," he said. "We were very quiet. We were very upset. But I think the players have grown since then. And now they're here."

Spain may look to their younger

players to seal their last-16 spot at the World Cup and some of those players including defender Pau Torres will be drawing on their Tokyo Olympics experience to help them prepare.

A number of Spain's under-23

squad from Tokyo are now in Qatar. "Japan are a very organised team, very consistent in what they do. I always think they have the game under control, they don't get out of the game until the final minutes," defender Pau Torres told Reuters on Tuesday.

Spain, the 2010 world champions will advance into the next round with a draw and a win would seal top spot in Group E. Japan, who sit second, risk losing out on a place in the knockout rounds to Germany or possibly Costa Rica, unless they beat Spain.

Torres suggested the side may have let their opening win go to their heads.

"Maybe it was over-confidence, having won the first game, as well as having seen our result against Costa Rica," the defender, who plays for Spanish LaLiga side Villarreal, said.

"We made that match look easy, and then we could see that after all, it wasn't easy at all."

Spain might have a young midfield but have dominated proceedings at the tournament. Pedri only turned 20 last week and his club colleague Gavi, 18, has also impressed and Koke praised the creative Barcelona duo.

"The two of them make magic, their level is spectacular given their age," Koke told a press conference Tuesday as Spain hope the youngsters rise to the occasion.