

## Cinderella narrative pops up

IRESH ZAKER

Cinderella, in the form of Japan, has finally arrived at the party. I suppose that Morocco's qualification at the expense of Belgium also defied expectations, but Japan knocking out Germany has to be the definitive David and Goliath story of the ongoing World Cup.

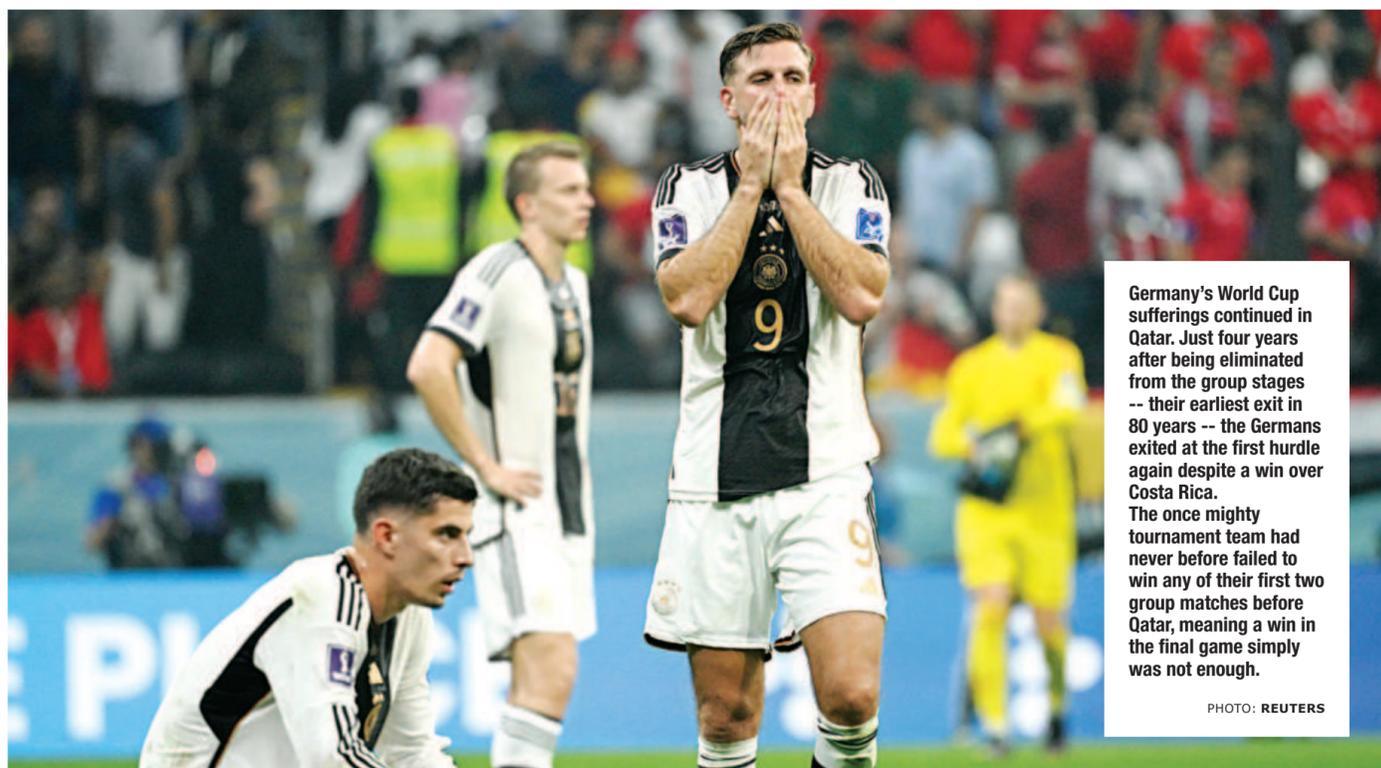
A straightforward knockout would have been spectacular enough, but no one in that group was interested in a linear narrative. All four teams in Group E looked like they would go through at various points during Thursday night's double header and, in the end, of course, it was Spain and Japan who prevailed. It was breathtaking, legendary stuff that will be retold for many a decade.

Admittedly I have been guilty of being frustrated by tournament underdogs flattering to deceive. I suppose I had not really thought deeply about the nuances of the Cinderella narrative.



THE LATERAL VIEW

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Germany's World Cup sufferings continued in Qatar. Just four years after being eliminated from the group stages -- their earliest exit in 80 years -- the Germans exited at the first hurdle again despite a win over Costa Rica. The once mighty tournament team had never before failed to win any of their first two group matches before Qatar, meaning a win in the final game simply was not enough.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Worst of my career, laments Kimmich

AGENCIES, Doha

The German Football Association (DFB) will next week launch a round of talks to identify the reasons for their second consecutive World Cup flop, after the team were eliminated in the group stage again on Thursday night.

But for some, like captain Joshua Kimmich, no answer would be sufficient.

"It's the worst day of my career," the Bayern Munich midfielder said, his voice nearly trembling.

"When I came to the Germany national team, they were World Cup winners, and in Euro 2016 we made it to the semi-final. Then we messed up 2018, wrote off the Euros and failed to make it out the group stage again here.

"My aim, attitude and responsibility was to help the team progress. I find it hard to cope with the fact that I'll be linked with these failures. I'm a little afraid of falling into that hole."

The campaign questioning the 27-year-old's moral fibre had already started last week. Bild called him "Chefchen" after the Japan game, which translates as "wannabe boss" and is the same disparaging term the paper had used to describe Bastian Schweinsteiger before the 2014 triumph.

"It's not just bad luck, it's also inability," Kimmich said. "Opponents don't have to do much to score goals against us."

Four-time champions Germany - who host the

European Championship in 2024 - crashed out of the World Cup despite their 4-2 victory over Costa Rica in their last Group E match, tumbling at the first hurdle for the second consecutive tournament.

They had arrived in Qatar determined to restore their tarnished reputation after their shock 2018 group stage exit. Instead they finished third in the standings, level on four points with Spain but behind on goal difference, and they return home early to face scathing criticism.

"You can imagine that today there is deep disappointment," DFB President Bernd Neundorff told reporters on Friday at Doha airport as the team prepared to return home. "This elimination is extremely painful. But we have to look ahead and so we will lead a process on how to deal with this."

Germany will host Euro 2024 and following their shock World Cup exit, expectations - and pressure - have just increased.

"The expectation is for the sporting direction to develop a prospect for after the tournament and the Euros (2024) on home soil," Neundorff said.

"It (analysis) must also include the development of the national team since 2018. This is the demand and claim that we have. Then we will have more talks." The Germans suffered a similar first-round exit at the 2018 World Cup, their earliest departure in over 80 years at the time, but they never before failed to win any of their first two group matches as in Qatar.



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To begin with, Cinderellas are rare. Moreover, the Cinderella story begins with an unexpected and short-lived triumph, is followed by a passage of great tribulation, and ends with enduring euphoria. As faithfully as Japan stuck to the script, I suppose that it was unfair to expect Iran and Saudi Arabia to do the same.

In a way, one Cinderella is enough though, especially when the players and fans conduct themselves with such dignity and class.

One of yesterday's compelling stories is the match between Uruguay and Ghana. It is a restaging of the famous encounter between the countries at the 2010 World Cup. In that game, forward Luis Suarez cleared the ball from the goal line with his hands, requiring Ghana to win by converting the ensuing penalty, which Asamoah Gyan had missed. The game then went to penalties, and Uruguay beat Ghana by a score of 4-2.

Suarez is no stranger to controversy, and many have harshly criticized his lack of ethics in doing what he did. When it comes to this particular incident, however, I am squarely on Suarez' side. He did what he had to do to help his country progress, even if that came at the expense of his personal participation and reputation. It was the Pavlovian response of a man driven by an intense desire to win. Far from being nefarious, I thought the act was heroic.

He had gone on to become an Anfield legend at Liverpool, something that excuses all manner of sins for me. Except perhaps the biting, as even a diehard Kopite like myself has trouble forgiving that. But not the handball. Never the handball.

## Blue wave engulfs Japan

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan erupted in cheers and tears after the national team's 2-1 win over Spain early on Friday, with crowds packing public viewing areas in the pre-dawn cold shrieking with joy as they stunned another global football power at the World Cup.

Japan, who had also shocked Germany in their opener in Qatar, finished top of Group E to reach the last 16, a stage where they have faltered three times before.

They will play 2018 runners-up Croatia for a place in the quarterfinals. "Doha Delights Again!" one newspaper headlined, evoking memories of what the media called the "Miracle in Doha" after Japan's win over the Germans.

Fans chanting "Nippon" poured into Tokyo's iconic Shibuya crossing before sunrise, jumping up and down and shouting "Fight, fight, fight!" as police struggled to control the crowd.

"I never thought Japan would advance first place in the group. Thank you Japan! I love you guys!" said 19-year-old Yusei Sato, wearing Japan's Samurai Blue jersey.

Takuya Kudo, 23, was in tears as soon as he saw Japan win. "I'm just so happy," he said. "Honestly, I never thought Japan would do this well. I'm just really thrilled."

Fans lingering in Shibuya pressed high-fives on bleary commuters making their way to work from one of Tokyo's busiest stations.

The sense of triumph rose even to Japan's normally staid political heights, with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida saying it was "historic" and telephoning Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu to offer congratulations. "I told them they gave the Japanese people courage and energy," Kishida said.



## Liton captain for India ODIs

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) yesterday announced Liton Das as captain for the three-match ODI series against India following a groin injury to Tamim Iqbal, which ruled the left-handed opener out of the series.

Liton had been part of the leadership group for a while and was handed the Test vice-captaincy earlier in the year when Shakib Al Hasan was handed the Test captaincy.

Earlier, with Tamim ruled out of the ODI series on Wednesday, speculations arose regarding whether Shakib Al Hasan may be handed the ODI captaincy for the upcoming series.

The all-rounder did not participate in the practice session yesterday but arrived at Mirpur later and chatted with head coach Russell Domingo and spin coach Rangana Herath.

He had a look at the wickets and was seen in discussion with head curator Gamini de Silva before leaving and his involvement gave the cue that he may not be handed the captaincy.

Liton's role and influence grew in the side following tremendous performances in all three formats and the BCB saw it fit to hand the right-handed batter the role for the important home series against India.

"Liton is one of the more experienced players in the side and has demonstrated leadership qualities. He has a sharp cricketing mind and reads the game well," BCB cricket operations chairman Jalal Yunus was quoted as saying in a media release yesterday, adding that Tamim would be missed tremendously.

Ghana came to the World 2022 World Cup with not just the lowest-ranked side in Qatar, but also the youngest team in the tournament based on average age. However, their fans did not care one jot about the naysayers, turning up in numbers and decked out in their national colours, hoping to spur their team onto greater heights.

PHOTO: REUTERS