



The making of AN UPSET

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SAMAMA RAHMAN

An upset stitches together thousands of individual and team moments, solid strategy and immaculate execution. Sometimes, the case may be that of a smash-and grab. Other times, an unfancied team may dominate from start to finish. But the absolute power that governs such results is unwavering self-belief.

Of course, as has often been the case when a David meets a Goliath, you can do everything perfectly and still fall short.

That was evidenced when Canada, playing their first World Cup in 36 years, took on Belgium, ranked No. 2 in the world. The Canadians attacked at will, racking up a 22 shots. The aggressors had earned an early penalty and had 17 shots from inside the box. Seven veered off target, three shots, and the penalty, were saved and the rest were blocked.

battle by the wiles of Morocco manager Walid Regragui and his players' unwavering dedication to the plan.

But there is no better example of execution coupled with self-belief than what was on offer during Saudi Arabia's sensational 2-1 win over Argentina to open their World Cup campaign.

Not only did manager Herve Renard keep faith in the high defensive line and pressing triggers that saw Saudi Arabia flourish in the AFC qualifiers, he did so against a team far superior to them technically.

They then doubled down, showing the audacity to continue doing so even after going ahead. Other teams may have reverted to an uber-defensive low block, but the Saudis trusted they could execute their Plan A better than an unfamiliar Plan B.

Crucially, they also made the most of the two chances that came their way as Saleh Al-

inside 45 minutes had their players held their runs just the slightest bit or if they had picked better passes. In this particular encounter, fortune favoured the brave.

In a scenario that was quite the opposite, luck allied itself with a besieged Japan team as they began their campaign with a 2-1 win against four-time world champions Germany.

For a long time, it had appeared destiny was not with the Blue Samurai. In the 73rd minute, down one goal, Japanese fans felt they had missed their golden opportunity when Hiroki Sakai had somehow missed from five yards out.

Germany had dominated most of the match, and that was reflected in the numbers. They took 25 shots, forcing Shuichi Gonda into eight saves in total and the Japanese backline into making 38 clearances.

Japan manager Hajime Moriyasu had used all five of his substitutes to ensure energy levels would stay up and, emboldened by their chance, Japan would go on to net two goals in the next 10 minutes.

Who is to say that was not their plan all along?

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So it made sense when, after recording a famous win in the same city, he wanted to make a point. He stressed that the ability to execute such a risky game plan, which allowed Germany to play to a lot of their own strengths, spoke to the growing strengths of nations outside traditional powerhouses, especially those in Asia that were still learning.

"We are reaching that global standard," Moriyasu said. "We saw Saudi Arabia's surprise win and we have again shown how strong Asian football's standard is. I believe it's a historic moment, a historic victory."

"If I think about the development of Japanese football, how we have built up from modest beginnings, then yes, Germany has contributed. So many great players and coaches have contributed and helped us. Japan won today but we are going to continue to learn from Germany and the rest of the world."

If nothing else, these teams have delivered a resounding message to the rest of the world by demonstrating that dedication, belief and effort is enough to foster technical development in players and coaches.



Such was the performance that Canada's fans drowned out their Belgian counterparts with chants of "this is our house".

But in the end, with one hopeful long ball over the top to Michy Batshuayi, Belgium had bulged the net and stolen the game 1-0. For an underdog, it was lesson one: execution is key.

That would also hold true in Belgium's next match, when the upset did arrive. Belgium lost 2-0, outmaneuvered completely in the midfield

Shehri delivered a clinical finish before Salem Al-Dawsari dared to score one of the best goals of the 2022 World Cup to snatch the lead.

Burgeoning self-belief was reflected as well, not least when Ali Al-Bulayhi squared up to Messi with more than half an hour left till the end of the game to deliver a simple message: "You will not win".

But as well-disciplined as the defensive line was, Argentina could have put the game to bed

'Having five substitutions made a big impact'

FIFA World Cup in Qatar has produced upsets in almost each group, with Asian sides causing major ones upsets to make the greatest show on earth full of excitement. Saiful Bari Titu, former coach of Bangladesh national team, is closely watching the matches. The veteran coach talked with the Daily Star's Anisur Rahman about the Asian teams' performances and other aspects of the World Cup.

The Daily Star (DS): What was your expectation from the World Cup in Qatar and how it is going so far?

Saiful Bari Titu (SBT): The expectation was that the big teams would perform well but there have been some upsets already. To me, there has been a lack of consistency as some teams did well in their first matches but could not carry it to the next matches. Some others played poorly in their first matches but bounced back strongly.

DS: The performances of teams, including big ones, have fluctuated a lot. Why do you think is happening?

SBT: It is clear that the gap between teams is gradually becoming lesser. Nowadays, teams, especially whom we consider mid-table sides, achieve their target by scripting a proper plan because they fight tightly against big teams. I think there is a big impact of having five substitutions as it is not always possible to play high pressing football throughout 90 minutes [with the same players], but if you can send five pairs of fresh legs and change players according to the game's requirements it becomes easier. What we have seen in Germany vs Japan



match is that Japan sent two extreme attacking players who scored two goals to win the match. The bottomline is that football has improved a lot and no opposition is unknown to anyone.

DS: Saudi Arabia and Japan caused big upsets while Iran surprised Wales after a huge defeat. Were those performances expected or would you see them as flukes?

SBT: I think the performance of Saudi Arabia, Japan and Iran were not flukes; rather it was all about planning and execution of tactical aspects. After beating Argentina, Saudi Arabia did not play badly against Poland but they lost. The result could have been different had they not squandered the spot-kick. I think all these things made the World Cup more interesting and it also showed that there are no minnows.

DS: The Asian teams are looking more competitive this time around. What could be the reasons?

SBT: Firstly, you need to ensure domestic structure if you want to take your football to that standard. If we talk about Saudi Arabia, who basically had no playing style as they often changed coaches. But with the appointment Herve Renard, who guided Zambia and Ivory Coast to AFCON titles, a fighting mentality has been built up and it doesn't matter for them who they play against. Another reason for the competitiveness of Asian nations is the exposure they get in the European leagues. Eight players from Japan are playing in Bundesliga while most Korean players are playing outside of Korea. Saudi Arabia and Qatar are also pushing hard to have players playing abroad. I think playing in foreign leagues has made a big impact on the development of the Asian players.

DS: But hosts Qatar were really disappointing. Do they really belong at this level?

SBT: I thought they were nervous and under pressure to deliver as the hosts. They are playing the World Cup for the first time and without playing the qualifying round, so they will lag behind a bit compared to other Asian teams. They played a lot of friendly matches but the intensity of World Cup and friendly matches are totally different. If Qatari players get the opportunity to play in Europe, they will definitely improve in coming days.

DS: Can Asian teams reduce the gap with the rest of world?

SBT: Asian teams should maintain the standard they have reached and they should play more competitive matches. We are putting the players into a system, thus reducing the freedom of their individual flourish. I think it will be tough to reduce the gap between Asia and the rest of the world until Asia produces individual talents. You need individual brilliance to get something positive in tight situations.

DS: Which Asian team has impressed you most and why?

SBT: I liked Japan's play because they showed character against Germany, who are known to have a tough rebound mentality. Japan coach's perfect substitutions and changing of the formation during the game was really praiseworthy. The performance of Korea was good but Saudi Arab impressed me the most. I have never seen this Saudi Arabia before. It was amazing to see them play high-line defence against Argentina and the players showed tough mentality too.