



Daley Blind celebrates after scoring in a 3-1 victory against the United States in the first match of the 2022 World Cup's round of 16 stage. Netherlands' wingbacks, Blind and Denzel Dumfries, decided the match. The former scored a goal and recorded one assist while Dumfries shone with two assists and a goal. PHOTO: REUTERS

Son eyes 'another miracle'

AFP, Doha

Son Heung-min wants his South Korea side to pull off "another miracle" and beat Brazil on Monday in the World Cup last 16 after their last-gasp heroics against Portugal.

The Koreans' tournament looked to be over until substitute Hwang Hee-chan popped up in injury time to score the winner in a 2-1 victory over already qualified Portugal on Friday in Qatar.

That propelled them into the knockout rounds and a daunting date with Brazil, one of the pre-tournament favourites.

But skipper Son, who has been playing in a mask following surgery last month for a fracture around his left eye, said they are not ready to go home just yet.

"This is great but our tournament is not over," Son said following the dramatic win over Portugal. "We've always talked about reaching the round of 16 as our objective but we should now try to go beyond that."

"I hope we can script another miracle," he added.

Some in South Korea are beginning to draw parallels with the national side of 2002 who stunned the world as co-hosts by reaching the semi-finals.

Current assistant coach Sergio Costa resisted such talk. "I cannot compare because I didn't know them personally," said Costa. "I've seen a few games from the past but I cannot make a comparison because I didn't know the Korean team back then. I can tell you what it is now -- it's a team that is very honest."

We can be even better, Van Dijk warns

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Netherlands defender Denzel Dumfries set up their first two goals and netted a decisive third to ensure a 3-1 victory over the United States on Saturday and a spot in the World Cup quarter-finals, thwarting US efforts at a late comeback.

Dumfries ended any hopes the Americans had of staging a rescue act after they had gone 2-0 down at halftime, tucking away a third goal for the Dutch that made sure of their victory and put the seal on an influential personal performance.

The United States had cut the deficit through Haji Wright in the 76th minute, but their hopes lasted just five minutes before Louis van Gaal's team wrapped up the win to set up a clash with Argentina or Australia, who were playing later.

The Dutch looked in command of the opening last-16 tie in front of a 44,846 crowd with two goals scored in similar fashion as Dumfries crossed from the right for Memphis Depay to net in the 10th minute and then Daley Blind on the stroke of halftime.

But they allowed the Americans back into the contest as substitute Wright scored a bizarre goal, a cross from Christian Pulisic hitting his heel and looping into the net.

It was another Dutch performance at the Qatar World Cup that will not please their demanding supporters as they were unusually cautious at times, played at a slow tempo, and lived dangerously by allowing the Americans plenty of possession.

Denzel Dumfries was aware that the Oranje had not left a great impression in the group stages, which some suggested was because he and Daley Blind did not bring enough as wingbacks. This time Blind was good for an assist and a goal while Dumfries produced two assists and a goal.

"I was focused. I'm glad I was able to help the team. We have of course had some criticism lately. This is a good boost for both of us, for us as wingbacks," Dumfries said.

He added that Van Gaal was not positive in his appraisal in the

dressling room at half-time, when the Dutch were up 2-0. "Yes, the coach was critical. He said we could put a little more pressure on the ball. We were sometimes too passive in that."

Meanwhile, Blind was especially positive. "We executed the game plan really well today. I don't know if it ever happened that both wingbacks gave each other an assist. We were very compact. Their central defenders had a very difficult time with that."

But captain Virgil van Dijk was still reserved, saying the team could do better.

"I think we could do better than we showed," the defender said afterwards. "Every game I feel a step better, but we can still be much better. Because we can play football very well, we have shown that many times."

The captain especially enjoyed the first two goals that the Dutch team produced. "I think we scored two fantastic goals. Then we concede one, I actually have no idea how it went in. But then we find a way to keep fighting and it says everything about this team."

US coach Gregg Berhalter was regretful, but a sense of pride also shone through. "I think we have shown the world that Americans can also play football."

He added: "We sat in the dressing room with a rotten feeling during the break. We were certainly no less than the Netherlands, but we were 2-0 behind. Yet we kept going for the 2-1 and we made it. But 5 minutes later, the Netherlands made it 3-1. That is quality, but that was also a huge blow to us."

Van Gaal, true to nature, focused on the bad before the good. "We have four team functions. One of them, possession of the ball, we didn't execute well," Van Gaal said after the match. "That was still not good, especially before the break, although we scored two beauties afterwards. In the second half, possession also improved. We scored two goals from wingback to wingback, which I am very proud of."

Nevertheless, it remains clear to Van Gaal that things have to be better. "Just because you won 3-1 doesn't mean you don't have to improve. We will play against even stronger opponents."



Africa's emphatic response in Qatar

AFP, Doha

Four years ago Africa was left without a representative in the World Cup last 16 for the first time since the round was introduced in 1986, but the response has been emphatic in Qatar.

The 2022 tournament has seen two teams from the continent reach the knockout phase for only the second time -- after Algeria and Nigeria in 2014.

African nations have also taken a record-breaking 24 points in the group stage, smashing the previous best of 15 points in 1998.

Morocco beat the world's second-ranked side Belgium and Canada en route to the top of Group F, while Senegal bounced back from an opening defeat by the Netherlands to record wins over Qatar and Ecuador.

Brazil were beaten by an African team for the first time with a 1-0 defeat by Cameroon, who exited the tournament in glory.

For Morocco, their clash with Spain next Tuesday will be a first appearance in the knockout stage for 36 years. Their fans will turn up in their thousands again to cheer on the only remaining Arab country in the World Cup.

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"We hope to fly the flag of African football high," said Morocco coach Walid Regragui.

"Often we've been described as being sub-par, not as good as elsewhere. But I think at this World Cup we are showing we can give any other team a run for their money, whether they be European teams or South American teams."

"I hope in the future this means we'll be seeing more African teams do well at the World Cup and why not an African champion?"

The 2026 World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico will involve more African countries than ever before, with the tournament set to expand from 32 to 48 teams.

If it does not happen this year, Africa will be expecting its first World Cup semifinalists sooner rather than later.

Kalidou Koulibaly volleyed Senegal to victory against Ecuador, after saying they were inspired by Morocco's win over Belgium.

"We saw what Morocco did. They had a beautiful win over Belgium," said Senegal coach Aliou Cisse. "Yes, it can be a source of inspiration for us."

The sides that went out in the group stage still made a mark on the tournament.

Tunisia claimed a famous 1-0 win over holders France and Cameroon beat Brazil.

More and more African players are starring at top European clubs. Even with Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane absent from this World Cup, the dividends of that are clear to see.

European teams have won each of the past four World Cups and no side from outside Europe or South America has ever even reached the final.

"You have to be strong for your first match against a European team because European teams are our foes when it comes to these events," added Regragui. "We have players who play for European clubs... We need to take the European mindset and make it our mindset."

'Swiss players eager to stretch WC run'

REUTERS, Doha

Switzerland made it through to the last 16 of the World Cup for a third time in a row after beating Serbia 3-2 in their final Group G game on Friday but their run in this tournament is far from finished, coach Murat Yakin said.

His team, who have now reached the knockout stages in their last five tournaments, including at the Euros, had to dig deep to come back from 2-1 down to snatch second place in their group.

"The players had the goal to make history and this is still not finished," Yakin said. "The team has moved closer together today, it is more experienced. Now we will enjoy the moment. In football we live for these moments."

The Swiss, who next face Portugal in the last 16, scored twice either side of the break with Breel Embolo and Remo Freuler to go back in front after Aleksandar Mitrovic's glancing header had cancelled out Xherdan Shaqiri's lead and Dusan Vlahovic's low shot had put them briefly ahead.

The game became bad-tempered towards the end as the Serbs needed



to win and with the referee showing 11 yellow cards.

Man-of-the-match Granit Xhaka, born to ethnic Albanian parents from Kosovo who in the previous World Cup had enraged Serbs by making a nationalist gesture when the two sides met, was often in the middle of these spats with Serbian opponents.

"I saw Granit focus on football. It was a fair game. It was a normal exchange with a bit of emotions. It cost us a lot of power and a lot of emotions. We started well, took the lead but then we lost possession twice and fell behind," said Yakin.

"But my players deserve a huge compliment for the way they came back."

Switzerland finished with six points, level with Group G winners Brazil but behind on goal difference, and will now turn their focus to their game against Portugal.

"We deserved this win," Yakin said. "Portugal do not like to play against us. They are the favourites but in a knockout stage game anything can happen."

"I think the team is ready for this match and the battle."

'WC starts from now'

AFP, Doha

Japan have already scripted one of the best stories of the World Cup with comeback victories over former champions Germany and Spain but Takuma Asano says they have not achieved anything yet.

Winger Asano scored a brilliant winner in the Germany win that kickstarted Japan's campaign but that was followed by a shock reverse at the hands of Costa Rica in their second group game. Another upset against Spain, however, sent Japan into the last 16 as group winners.

"Even though we didn't win them all, I think the most important thing is that we made it through the group stage," Asano told reporters on Saturday. "Now I started feeling it's becoming a great World Cup. But we haven't achieved anything yet, so honestly speaking, I think everything starts from now."

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