



For Brazil to navigate their way past South Korea and reach the last eight, they would have to be at their best against a resilient Asian side tonight. The return of their star playmaker Neymar from injury would be a great boost for the five-time champions. While Neymar adds exclusive creative flair to Brazil, despite the overwhelming talent at their disposal, the Koreans would keep relying on their captain Son Heung-min to lead from the front, and remain unfazed by the fractured eye socket. PHOTO: CBF/REUTERS

Tireless Modric leading by example

AFP, Doha

Croatia's squad features only a few of the players which led them to the World Cup final in 2018, runners-up to France, but Luka Modric is defying time to be one of those few constants.

The 37-year-old Real Madrid midfielder worked tirelessly across the full 90 minutes of the 0-0 draw with Belgium on Thursday to book Croatia's place in the last 16, where they face Japan on Monday.

The captain leads by example, showing the younger players what is possible and how much effort achieving it takes.

If the 2018 Ballon d'Or winner, with five Champions League titles to his name, still toils selflessly in midfield, there can be no excuses for anyone else not to follow suit.

Croatia defender Josip Juranovic believes Modric is setting an example to the squad's younger players to fend off World Cup fatigue. "I can't wait for the game to start. When you see people like Luka Modric running and dying on the pitch, it gives us younger players extra energy to run," the Celtic defender told a press conference Saturday.

Croatia finished second in Group F and

Japan to invoke Samurai spirit

REUTERS, Doha

Japan will invoke the spirit of the Samurai warrior in their clash with Croatia on Monday as they look to banish the memory of their exit from the last World Cup and reach the quarter-finals for the first time.

The heartbreaking defeat by Belgium in the last 16 four years ago, when they gave up a 2-0 lead and lost to a stoppage-time goal, still haunts Japan and veteran defender Yuto Nagatomo said they were desperate for redemption.

"I have never forgotten about that battle against Belgium. Sometimes scenes from the match suddenly come back to me and the last four years have been very tough," the full back, who is playing at his fourth World Cup, told reporters on Sunday.

Nagatomo, who believes Japan have the most united team at the World Cup, said he had also drawn on Japanese cultural references to drive the point home.

"I use the analogy of the Samurai, before they go to battle, they polish their weapons and try to improve their techniques," he added.

"But if they are scared during the battle, they will not be able to use their weapons and their techniques fully. It's exactly the same with football.

"In order for us to maximise all the tactics that we have been discussing and practising in the last four years, we need courage. So tomorrow, I would really very much like to showcase how courageously we are fighting."

Brazil get Neymar boost ahead of South Korea clash

AGENCIES

World Cup favourites Brazil confirmed Neymar to return for their last-16 match against South Korea on Monday, a news that came as a relief to the five-time World Champions who have a host of injury concerns in their squad.

Brazil coach Tite said that Neymar would be training on Sunday and that the forward was also set to feature for the Selecao against South Korea after recovering from an ankle injury.

Neymar suffered the injury in Brazil's opening 2-0 win over Serbia, which ruled him out of their 1-0 win over Switzerland and the shock defeat by Cameroon, one of a series of injury problems within the squad.

"Neymar will train today [Sunday] in the afternoon and if he trains well he will play," Tite told a news conference.

Neymar has suffered many issues with his right foot and underwent surgery four years ago for a fractured metatarsal.

"I feel good, I knew that I would now," Neymar wrote on Instagram on Saturday with a reference to James Brown.

The news of his return to the starting lineup came after Thiago Silva was asked during a news conference if Neymar would play and Tite took hold of the microphone and said "yes".

It will be warmly welcomed in a squad beset by fitness woes with Danilo also hurting his ankle against Serbia and Alex Sandro suffering a hip injury against the Swiss.

Alex Telles and forward Gabriel Jesus, who sustained a knee injury

against Cameroon, were ruled out for the rest of the tournament on Saturday.

Tite said Danilo was also fit to return against South Korea on Monday but Sandro was out. "He can't play. Still recovering, Danilo and Neymar are back," he said.

With Neymar back, Tite said there will be no changes in the forward line from the team that started against Serbia, with Lucas Paqueta behind Neymar, Vinicius Jr., Raphinha and Richarlison.

The biggest question mark is who will play left back with Sandro and Telles ruled out.

Marquinhos replaced the Sevilla defender after he sustained the injury against Cameroon, but right back Danilo and midfielder Everton Ribeiro are also options.

"Alex Sandro's replacement will be a player that have already played in that position in his club. Make your research and you will find out who he is," Tite said.

If Tite opts to use Real Madrid centre back Eder Militao as a full back, as he did in the absence of Danilo against Switzerland, Brazil would have no other defenders to sit on the bench.

Meanwhile, South Korea will rely on talisman Son Heung-min to lead them against the odds-on favourites on Monday, after he ran himself into the ground on Friday to ensure his team reached the last 16 with a dramatic come-from-behind 2-1 win over Portugal on Friday.

The Koreans are the only Asian side to have reached the semi-finals before, when they were co-hosts with Japan in 2002, and they will be hoping to shock Brazil on Monday to make history again.

BRAZIL VS SOUTH KOREA	
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH
Matches 7	Vinicius Jr (Brazil)
Brazil 6	Son Hueng-min (South Korea)
South Korea 1	Caps 18
	Goals 1
	Caps 107
	Goals 35



Juranovic, 27, played 90 minutes in all three games, while Modric also played 90 minutes against Morocco in the goalless opener, and 86 against Canada, in the team's thumping 4-1 win.

In the Belgium and Morocco games, Modric was awarded man of the match.

Even though some of his contributions are subtle, and thankless at times, they have been rewarded in Qatar, not that his teammates need any reminders of his quality.

Modric is among the tournament's best passers, driving Croatia up the pitch with clever balls, while maintaining his defensive discipline.

He has made several important interceptions, presses well and is also capable of deciding when to drop deeper alongside Marcelo Brozovic.

Perhaps what helps keep Modric running, fighting and competing at an elite level is his mindset. "Whatever we've been through during the 2018 World Cup was an unforgettable experience but we need to put it aside and focus on what is ahead of us," said Modric before the World Cup.

Japan's raiders face determined Croatia

REUTERS

Japan's sensational smash-and-grab raids at the World Cup have already seen off Germany and Spain, but in the last 16 on Tuesday they come up against a Croatia side who might just be a little too streetwise for a mugging.

Croatia have not shown the quality that got them to the final four years ago, especially in front of goal, but did what they needed to do to get through their group, only showing any signs of panic in their last match against a desperate Belgium.

Captain Luka Modric, who with Ivan Perisic and Dejan Lovren forms a high class but ageing core to the team, says they fear no-one and they will have done their homework on the Samurai Blue.

Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu might need to produce something new tactically for the clash at the Al Janoub Stadium, having taken a similar approach to their first three games.

Inviting teams onto the field for 45 minutes then switching to a more offensive formation and trying to snatch goals on the

break worked perfectly against Spain and Germany but was a bust in Japan's loss to lowly Costa Rica.

Croatia, if anything, have patience and will happily stroke the ball around in front of the Japan defence probing for weaknesses without, perhaps, getting frustrated as Spain and Germany did.

They probably also have the technical smarts to make adjustments themselves when Moriyasu finally shows his hand with the switch to a back three and the introduction of pacy forwards like Kaoru Mitoma and Ritsu Doan. The 12th-ranked Croatians are favourites to beat 24th-ranked Japan, but the Samurai Blue astounded expectations to defeat two powerhouses and former World Cup winners in the group stage.

"They will apply the Samurai warrior philosophy. So will we. If we want to go further, we must apply that same attitude, do our best and never underestimate anyone," Croatia coach Zlatko Dalic told reporters. "Japan is the most perseverant, persistent opponent. They simply do not give up. We have a similar mentality. We stand on equal ground."

JAPAN VS CROATIA	
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH
Matches 3	Daizen Maeda (Japan)
Japan 1	Luka Modric (Croatia)
Croatia 1	Caps 10
Draw 1	Goals 1
	Goals 23



Japan are eyeing their first-ever quarterfinal berth at the World Cup and believe it is something very much within their reach, especially after coming from behind to beat heavyweights Spain and Germany to qualify for last 16 as group champions. The Samurai Blue will hope to produce something similar against last edition's runners-up Croatia today. PHOTO: REUTERS