



World Cup moulds Qatar into a new form

ATIQUÉ ANAM from Doha

Qatar has never seen anything like it before and it has been waiting to see it – the FIFA World Cup – in flesh for more than a decade. And the tiny oil-rich nation has done its best, despite the criticism, to put on its best face to the world for this global event.

Once you land in this peninsula bordering Saudi Arabia, you will start to realise what hosting the World Cup means to Qatar, given its long-held sporting, cultural and political ambitions. There are enormous structures that have sprouted up from underneath the desert, in less than a decade.

For starters, the Hamad International Airport – a sprawling structure in the capital of Qatar completed in 2014, replaced the Doha International Airport as the premier airport hub of the region and the home of Qatar Airways, to give the nation a facelift. At the entrance of the airport, you are greeted by billboards of Neymar, Harry Kane, Virgil van Dijk and who's who of world football – all geared to welcome the people of the world to a place which only appeared at this world cup by dint of becoming the hosts.

The next thing you come across is La'eeb – the official mascot of the tournament – a cute little thing relentlessly in its holographic form inside glass-paneled tubes. Dressed in the traditional Arab dress, Agal, La'eeb is everywhere around the city, and beyond – morphing Arab culture and football into one. Although an ethereal figure, La'eeb is the humane face of this World Cup, which has copped its fair share of flak, mostly from the western media, over the oil-rich nation's treatment of migrant labour force and its overall human rights record.

Ever since the World Cup was awarded to Qatar in



2010, this nation has seen a construction boom, spending hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure, including seven new stadiums and one renovated, the Hamad International Airport and myriad hotels and other establishments.

One such infrastructure is the Doha Metro, which opened to public just before the pandemic, and made life easier for fans, officials and journalists for the World Cup. Even on a non-match-day, the Doha Metro is full of passengers, many of whom have come just to enjoy the World Cup.

Tomas and his father Osvaldo have come all the way from Buenos Aires to watch what is supposed to be the last World Cup for Lionel Messi. Both wearing Messi shirts, they were going to the practice session of the Argentina team at the Qatar University Ground.

When approached for an informal interview with the introduction that this reporter was from Bangladesh, both spoke with genuine interest, and quite a bit of gusto in their voice.

"I know Bangladesh. I know Bangladeshis love Argentina," Tomas quipped, before getting on to the more serious talk.

"Messi, Messi. Messi is the best," said Tomas, with his father by his side nodding in approval.

At the other compartment were a band of Netherlands supporters, wearing that unmistakable Oranje, and chanting away slogans in Dutch about their heroes.

This is what the organisers had dreamt of when they envisioned the first Arab World Cup a decade and a half ago. People who had nothing to do with Qatar, except for its oil of course, would be here and watch the best footballers on the globe on inside these futuristic stadia. The organisers, apparently, have been vindicated.



Neymar and Lucas Paqueta were amongst the ones trying to throw Vinicius Jr in the air during an upbeat training session and the trio would like to carry similar coordination into their World Cup quarterfinal clash against Croatia at the Education City Stadium in Al Rayyan today.

PHOTO: TWITTER

Hexa aspirant Brazil brace for Croatia hurdle

AFP, Doha

Brazil head into Friday's World Cup quarterfinal against Croatia brimming with confidence after Neymar's return inspired a performance laced with swagger and arrogance in the last 16.

Their eye-catching 4-1 victory against South Korea, which featured goals by Vinicius Junior, Richarlison and Lucas Paqueta as well as a Neymar penalty, sent out an ominous message to their rivals in Qatar.

The football, for the first 45 minutes at least, was free-flowing and full of joy, the players celebrating their goals by showing off their dance moves and even getting Tite, their 61-year-old coach, to join in.

So thrilling were the Selecao at Doha's Stadium 974 that their performance drew comparisons in some quarters with the very best and most entertaining Brazil sides, from the 1970 team of Pele to the 1982 vintage led by Socrates.

Yet it was just one game, and it came after the five-time champions scored just three goals in three group matches and also lost to Cameroon, their first defeat in the opening round at a World Cup since 1998.

Brazil will surely settle for a simple victory without the exhibition football when they take on 2018 runners-up Croatia at Education City Stadium, mindful of results at recent World Cups.

Since they won their fifth title in 2002, Brazil have gone out each time to European opponents, including a 7-1 humiliation at the hands of Germany on home

soil in 2014 and a defeat by Belgium four years ago in Russia. And they would want to avoid anything similar in their mission to add the sixth star above their logo.

"We are dreaming of winning the title, that's obvious, but we have to go step by step," Neymar said after the victory over South Korea.

"This was the fourth game. There are three to go but we are prepared. Our minds are focused on winning the title."

Neymar returned to the starting line-up for the last 16 after suffering an ankle injury in the opening 2-0 victory over Serbia, while the return of Danilo at left-back was almost significant.

Tite has lost another full-back, Alex Telles, for the rest of the tournament but another,

Alex Sandro, is training again and hopes to be back. If that is the case then Danilo will switch over to right-back and Eder Militao should drop out of the side.

Croatia made it to the final four years ago after being taken to extra time in three consecutive matches and they required an extra half hour as well as penalties to get the better of Japan in the last 16 on Monday.

The fear now is that this game might be a step too far for Zlatko Dalic's resilient side, who have much the same spine as four years ago and are still led by the 37-year-old Luka Modric.

But Croatia, who have lost just once since last year's European Championship, believe they can compete and may use their Nations League win over France in Paris in June as an example to follow.

INFO ZONE		
CROATIA VS BRAZIL		
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH	NEWMEN
Matches 4	Luka Modric	Neymar
Brazil 3	(Croatia)	(Brazil)
Croatia 0	Caps 159	Caps 123
Draw 1	Goals 23	Goals 76

Croatia aim to set record straight earlier than hoped

REUTERS, Al Rayyan

Croatia coach Zlatko Dalic wishes their World Cup last-eight clash against five-time world champions Brazil was instead a mouth-watering final but his side are ready to set the record straight with a first ever win over the heavy favourites.

Dalic compared Friday's encounter to their final against France four years ago, which they lost 4-2, and said failure to win against Brazil on four previous occasions meant nothing.

"I believe that this match will be the most demanding one," he told a news conference on Thursday. "I can compare it to the final against France in the previous World Cup."

"A great opponent and a great challenge for us. We have had 11 matches at these two World Cups and we lost one. I wish this match came a bit later, I wish it waited for us later (in the tournament) but life is such."

"Croatia are a small country and enjoying success in two World Cups. We managed to reach this stage but we are ambitious and don't want to stay here," Dalic said.



Brazil have been among the most exciting teams to watch in Qatar while Croatia, with 18 new players in the squad since 2018, are still somewhat unproven, according to Dalic.

Only a handful of veterans from their last campaign are included this time

round, led by 37-year-old captain Luka Modric.

"There are 18 new players who were not at the World Cup (in 2018). We need time to develop and mature. Our success to be among the eight best teams is tremendous," Dalic said.

"They have still to prove themselves at the World Cup and tomorrow [Friday] is a good opportunity for them to do so. We want to do more and if we manage to do it, it would be spectacular. It would be better if it was the final."

Croatia defender Dejan Lovren was aware of the depth of this Brazilian side and respected the quality that Tite's men possess.

"Brazil were favourites before the tournament. They have two teams that can play at this level," Lovren said on Wednesday. "Any of their substitutes can come on and make an instant impact. We respect everybody and that is how we work."

Croatia have lost three times and drawn once against Brazil but skipper Modric said now was the time for things to change.

"We have faced Brazil on several occasions and never won against them. I hope we can change the tradition," he said.

"We have to play our best match and then we have a chance. We should not be satisfied with reaching the quarter-finals," he said.

THE LATERAL VIEW

How not to go overboard

FRESH ZAKER



It has been an angst-ridden couple of days for the millions of Brazil and Argentina fans in Bangladesh. There was some alleviation in the form of another famous ODI win by Bangladesh against India on Wednesday, but Thursday was brutal for a lack of footballing action.

Even a neutral such as myself is suffering from serious World Cup withdrawal. Eight days of non-stop breasting action followed by a small sea of absolute nothingness is hard to digest.

I am a veteran of many world cups, and well versed in football rivalry. So let me offer some tips to the Albiceleste and Selecao faithful about how to deal with the stress of waiting for their respective fixtures without turning on each other.

First of all, it will be good to remember that Brazil and Argentina are not actually playing each other on Friday. They have more immediate fish to fry. Neither fixture will be easy as both the Netherlands and Croatia are tricky opponents in their own rights. Stick to praying for your own team. There is little purchase in casting the first



stone before the confrontation is guaranteed, as no one benefits from that kind bad karma. If possible, limit interactions to hello and goodbye.

Speaking of which, learn to say hello, goodbye, and whatever unsavoury insults you want to throw your rival's way in Spanish if you are an Argentina supporter; and Portuguese if you root for Brazil. This way, not only do you spend the tense hours leading up to the game gainfully learning a new language, you also make sure that whatever you say will be totally incomprehensible to your opponents, and thereby further contain the potential for a combustible situation.

Speaking of combustibles, do not, and I cannot stress this enough, handle fire or firecrackers on Friday. Not even to test the batch you have purchased in anticipation of a celebration. Even if they all prove to be duds, it is a small price to pay for the horrendous ramifications of literally lighting a fuse prior to Brazil and Argentina matches.

Finally, should both sides prevail on Friday, set off all the firecrackers that you have in your arsenal that very night. We could really do with as few inflammable items lying around as possible should there be a Brazil and Argentina confrontation in the semifinals.

I am both excited and slightly mortified by this possible eventuality. And I really have no words of wisdom to share with either party to quell the tension should such a situation arise. Except maybe, beg the Brazil fans not to utter the word six or Hexa, and implore the Argentina faithful to refrain from saying seven in any language.