

The tree of dreams

ATIQUE ANAM FROM DOHA

Close to a hundred years after Uruguay hosted the first FIFA World Cup in 1930, the South American nations have united in their bid to bring the Greatest Show on Earth back to its birthplace to mark the centenary edition. Uruguay and Argentina, the finalists of that inaugural edition, jointly presented the bid to co-host the quadrennial event in 2017, the case promoted by Lionel Messi and Luis Suarez among many football stars. And the South American Football Confederation (CONMEBOL) is firmly behind that bid, ensuring all it can to promote the bid.

Part of the promotion is the CONMEBOL – Tree of Dreams, located at Sikkat Al Wadi in Msheireb Downtown Doha, which is drawing crowds in droves from the South American nations and the rest of the world.

Fans can take a tour through how South American football evolved throughout the years, and play interactive games that will put their football knowledge and skill to the test.

Among many visitors to the exhibition on Friday afternoon were Mahmoud and his son Hussain, from Morocco. Hussain, an aspiring footballer and a self-confessed Cristiano Ronaldo fan, was looking forward to seeing his country take on Ronaldo's Portugal on Saturday. But before that he was happy to immerse himself in the history of South American football.

"The museum and the galleries are amazing. Since I'm a footballer myself, seeing these antique items and replica trophies and the statues of Maradona and Pele will surely motivate me to become a good footballer one day," said the youngster.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is a tree, described as the energy of South America. "Feel the energy of the continent pulsing through the tree, feeding the passion and instinct of South American football's past, present and future," says the inscription on the tree – 6.1 metres in height and engraved with member associations, great names of the sport in South America.

The exhibition is divided into three segments: The Best Players, Home of the Icons and Best Tournaments.

The legends of South American football are displayed in the Best Players gallery. Fans can select "The dream team," a perfect squad featuring their favourite players on interactive displays. It also features three different games: Golazo Metre to test visitors' football kicking skills, Fastest Ginga to test the agility, and Conmebol corner to test one's sharpshooting skills.

Home of the icons is where the fans can connect with two of South America's greatest sons – Maradona and Pele, life-size sculptures of both with opportunities for visitors to take photos. It also features historical items from the very first World Cup: The Jules Rimet Trophy, Tiento Football, both from Uruguay World Cup 1930 and Obdulio Varela's ankle boots, Brazil World Cup 1950.

Hasnain, a migrant worker from the Indian state of Kerala, was delighted to be at the exhibition on the holiday. Flanked by two of his colleagues, Arshad was taking photos with the two legends of football.

"We will never get to see these football legends in our lives, but coming here taking photos with their sculptures makes me feel as if I'm with them," Arshad said.



Having done everything in his power on Friday night to keep his side's Hexa mission alive in Qatar, including scoring a marvellous extra-time goal, it was natural that Neymar could not hold back tears once tie-breakers ended against Brazil's favour. However, a wonderful gesture of empathy took place when the son of Croatia forward, Ivan Perisic, approached Neymar and consoled the Brazilian superstar before joining his dad in the celebrations. Neymar, too, showed great spirit by acknowledging the boy's gesture.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Neymar and Co 'can now only lament' exit

AFP, DOHA

Yet another World Cup has ended in tears for Neymar, with football's most expensive player hinting he may not pull on the Brazil shirt again following a painful defeat to Croatia.

The 30-year-old, who gave Brazil the lead during extra time of their quarter-final in Doha with a brilliant individual effort, was distraught after Croatia triumphed on penalties.

Speaking to reporters, his voice trembling with emotion, he admitted he could not "100 percent guarantee" he would be seen in the famous yellow shirt again.

Neymar, who has 124 Brazil caps, will be 34 by the time the next World Cup comes around in North America in 2026.

That is still younger than many leading names in Qatar, from Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo to Luka Modric and Oliver Giroud.

But Brazil's brittle number 10 hinted last year that he would not appear at another World Cup, suggesting in one interview that he might not have the mental strength "to put up with even more football".

Neymar has carried the hopes of a nation into three World Cups since his emergence as a generational talent at Santos. He has scored eight World Cup goals but the tournament has exposed his vulnerable physique and fragile emotions.

In 2014, playing on home soil, he was cut down in a quarter-final win over Colombia and stretched off in agony with a fractured bone in his back.

Without him Brazil capitulated, losing the semi-final 7-1 to Germany.

Four years ago, Brazil's build-up to the tournament in Russia was dominated by his battle to recover from an operation on a broken bone in his foot.

He came back in time, but that World Cup was still remembered for his tears in a win over Costa Rica before the Selecao lost in the quarter-finals to Belgium.

This time he appeared to be in peak physical shape as he arrived in Qatar, only to sprain an ankle in Brazil's first game, which forced him out of the next two matches. He returned to score against South Korea in the last 16 and then opened the scoring with a brilliant goal against Croatia, equalling Pele's record tally of 77 for Brazil in the process.

But while Pele won three World Cups, Neymar looks like he will never achieve what "O Rei" (the King) managed, along with other Brazilian greats who lifted the trophy, from Garrincha and Jairzinho to Romario and Ronaldo.

"I am not closing any doors on the national team but I am also not guaranteeing 100 percent that I will return," he said on Friday. Neymar also missed Brazil's 2019

Copa America triumph due to injury, but his tears have not just come in a Brazil shirt.

He cried after Paris Saint-Germain lost to Bayern Munich in the 2020 Champions League final, and he has shown his distress when suffering the injuries that have regularly interrupted his club career in Paris.

Neymar left Barcelona in 2017 because he wanted to win the Ballon d'Or, but he has still not managed to win that prize and in Paris -- now reunited with Lionel Messi -- he lives in the shadow of Kylian Mbappe.

Even if Neymar decides to play on, with the next Copa America set for 2024, a new cycle will begin for a Brazil side who have gone out of the past five World Cups to European opposition, four times losing in the quarter-finals.

"I don't know what will happen with the Brazil team going forward but now we can only lament what has happened," admitted Neymar.

'Happily tired' Croatia preparing for Argentina

REUTERS, Doha

Croatia can be hugely proud of eliminating tournament favourites Brazil on penalties to reach the World Cup last four but they are now in a state of limbo, coach Zlatko Dalic said on Saturday.

Croatia, runners-up in 2018, stunned Brazil by coming back with a late equaliser in the second half of extra time on Friday before knocking them out in the penalty shootout after two Brazilians failed to convert their spot kicks.

"When you kick out of the World Cup a team like Brazil which surely were the biggest favourites, then you must be both happy and proud," Dalic told reporters after receiving applause from Croatian media representatives when he entered the news conference room.

"I am tired but happily tired and... one should enjoy this moment, but not too much as today we already have to start to prepare for Argentina."

Croatia, with a population of just over 3.5 million, have been punching above their weight on the international stage for years but Friday's result was among the biggest upsets in the tournament given Brazil's recent form and Dalic's ageing squad that had also needed penalties to beat Japan in the last 16.

"At this moment, we are not anywhere, neither here nor there," Dalic said. "If we crashed out of the group stage, we would have gotten over it, if we were eliminated in the quarter-finals we would have gotten over it too."

"But we have come to this stage and now what?"



Tigers upbeat despite Kishan special

SPORTS REPORTER

Despite a heavy defeat in the third and final ODI in Chattogram after a record-breaking double-hundred from Ishan Kishan, Bangladesh remained upbeat about the fact that they had secured a memorable series win against India.

The Tigers clinched the series after two hard-fought wins in the first two ODIs in Dhaka as man of the series Mehedi Hasan Miraz led the way for only a second-ever bilateral series win against India. Miraz had a terrific series with both bat and ball, smashing his maiden hundred in the second ODI as the hosts held their nerves in yet another nail-biter.

The 25-year-old, who got his first player of the series award in the 50-over format, was hopeful that the Tigers could improve ahead of the ODI World Cup next year.

"This is the first time I'm getting a man of the series award in ODIs. It's a start for our team. We have a World Cup coming up and I hope we can get better. We have lots of senior guys talking to us. I just keep thinking positively," Miraz said during the post-match presentation ceremony yesterday.

It was also a memorable series for skipper Liton Das, who was handed the role at the last moment after regular ODI captain Tamim Iqbal was ruled out with a groin injury.

However, it was Kishan who stole the limelight as the visitors made a strong comeback and sealed a



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

comprehensive 227-run win. Virat Kohli also smashed his 72nd international century and added a record 290-run second-wicket partnership with Kishan as India posted a mammoth 409 for eight before bundling Bangladesh out for 182.

"Ishan and Virat batted really well. Hats off to Ishan. We tried our best, but we didn't find any solutions. If the score would have been 330-340, it would have been a different ball game. They are a good side, and we played good cricket for two games," Liton said.

Kishan, who struck the fastest double-hundred in ODI cricket off just 126 balls with 26 fours and 10 sixes, said that he was enjoying his time in the middle and was focusing on hitting loose deliveries when offered.

"On the international stage, you try to get a lot when you get a few. I got a lot of help from the support staff. I was just picking the ball and the bowlers. Things went my way. After looking at the wicket, I knew it was going to play well. I was trying to smash loose balls," Kishan said.

Neither here nor there. That is why we have to do all we can to achieve something more because it would be a great shame if after all these worries, efforts and the sacrifices we have made we don't go a step further."

Croatia will now face Argentina, who also needed penalties in a bad-tempered game to overcome the Netherlands after leading 2-0 and the Dutch scoring twice late in the game to force extra time and then a shootout.

The Croats had also required two penalty shootouts and an extra-time win to reach the final in 2018 before losing to France, so fatigue at a tournament is not new to them.

"Fatigue will not be an issue at all, and we will not mention it at all," Dalic said. "They (Argentina) are also very motivated, they are awaiting the title and they are happy because Brazil fell out and they celebrate it."

The coach had heaped praise on Brazil prior to their quarter-final, calling them 'terrifying' and he was equally respectful of their semi-final opponents with Lionel Messi-led Argentina eyeing their first world title since 1986.

Messi has scored four goals so far as he looks for his first World Cup trophy in his fifth attempt.

"I think that a very, very tough job is awaiting us now," Dalic said. "They will have huge support now in the semi-finals as (Lionel) Messi is still their main player and someone they can rely on, he plays splendidly."

"I really cannot yet review Argentina just yet. All will depend on us. If we do not play right, if we are not serious and motivated, it will be in vain even if they perform poorly. I think at this time they are excellent as they reached semi-finals."