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FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar 2022

Morocco change the mood for African football

REUTERS, *Doha*

Morocco's exciting run to a first-ever World Cup semi-final will inject a new energy in African football and hold out hope for the continent's teams when they return in larger numbers in four years' time.

African football had been in a crisis of confidence after the last World Cup in Russia, when none of the five teams made it out of the group phase, but that has now all changed with the performance of Walid Regragui's team in Qatar.

Beating Belgium, Canada, Portugal and Spain saw Morocco become the first African and Arab country in the last four of the tournament and a reference point now for others to try and emulate.

It was an impressive achievement, particularly as they carried injuries, had several half-fit players in their squad and looked fatigued in most matches, yet were able to display a resolute determination and sense of purpose.

A lot of this came because of the fevered support they enjoyed. In each of their matches, they had large contingent of fans, who raised the decibel level considerably and created an extra energy for the team.

But young coach Regragui, appointed only three months earlier, was also able to create a team spirit despite having the most heterogenous squad at the tournament.

Morocco draw their players mainly from the many communities dotted around Europe, with many third generation players knowing little Arabic, Berber or French, and therefore finding it difficult to communicate with their team mates.

"We are much more of a family, more of a club side than a national team," said Regragui.

"And I think that's what's given us this great strength."

Morocco showed several aspects to their game in Qatar, with tenacious defence seeing them through against Spain in the last-16 but against France in Wednesday's semi-final playing with attacking purpose when many expected they would sit back and absorb the pressure.

"I think we've given a good image of Morocco and a good image of African football and that was also important for us, because we were representing our country and our continent."

They can now look ahead to the Africa Cup of Nations in 13 months' time when the finals are hosted in the Ivory Coast in January 2024.

It is a trophy Morocco have won only once, in 1976, despite often being among the favourites.

Morocco will also expect to be back at the expanded 48-team World Cup in 2026 when Africa has nine places, and a possible further 10th via a playoff.

But before that, they will take on Croatia in Saturday's third place playoff match in Doha.

Friendship took a backseat for 90 minutes at the Al Bayt Stadium but after the final whistle, it was all love and hugs between France superstar Kylian Mbappe and Morocco talisman Achraf Hakimi. Following France's 2-0 victory which ended Morocco's fairytale run, Mbappe picked up his PSG teammate and consoled the right-back who was in charge of keeping him at bay. The two exchanged shirts and put them on as they waved to their supporters in gratitude after the match.

PHOTO: AFP

Mbappe with world at his feet

ATIQUE ANAM *from Doha*

When Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi broke the 100m dollar mark in annual earnings for the first time, both of them were in their 30s. In comparison, Kylian Mbappe broke that threshold at 23 and is about to be anointed as the richest-earning footballer of all time, according to Forbes.

Having won a World Cup at the age of 19 and moving into another final in four years, it was probably time the French sensation was regarded in the same esteem that many regard Messi, Ronaldo, and Neymar. It was probably time Mbappe stamped his authority on world football with a second World Cup title.

The process of his ascension to the top started four years ago when a dynamic Mbappe burst onto the scene, and powered Les Bleus to their second World Cup title, scoring four goals and becoming the best young player of the tournament.

Born in Paris in 1998 – the year Zinedine Zidane inspired France to their first World Cup title – Mbappe showed his precocious talent from a young age and duly was hailed as the next big star of French football – in the long line of greats such as Michelle Platini, Eric Cantona, Jean Pierre Papin and, of course, Zinedine Zidane.

But since Zidane retired in 2006, the French team seemingly lost their aura of dominance and grace, despite producing a batch of technically gifted and versatile players. They were out in the group stages of the 2010 World Cup and then lost to eventual winners, Germany, in the quarterfinals four years later.

Mbappe, meanwhile, emerged as the team's saviour and brought back the aura of invincibility to the team, assisted by a group of experienced and talented teammates.

It is easy for a youngster drawing in million-dollar endorsements and salaries, to lose focus from football. It is easy to lose yourself in the endless parties of the fashion capital of the world. A great many talents have been wasted down that road. But not with Mbappe, whom the best-selling French sports paper L'Equipe recently anointed as The King.

Mbappe hasn't lost an iota of his spark, his pace and his trickery from four years ago. He has carried the same joy and mischief about himself, fitting for a teenager: his pranks with his teammates, bursting into a fit of laughter when Harry Kane missed his spot kick and then, taunting his good friend Achraf Hakimi with the threat of destroying him.

Away from the fun and banter, he is rivalling the best at this World Cup with his jaw-dropping goals. With five goals and two assists in the bag so far, the 23-year-old is running alongside Messi for both the Golden Ball and the Golden Boot awards.

Following the win over Poland, Mbappe tweeted in support of the ailing Brazilian legend Pele, with the words, "Pray for the King."

In return, Pele responded, "I'm happy to see you breaking another one of my records in this Cup, my friend!"

Pele, in his hospital bed in Sao Paulo, will undoubtedly be glad if Mbappe lifts the trophy on Wednesday night to become the second youngest man to win two World Cup titles, after the great Brazilian himself.

THE LATERAL VIEW

Dembele's relief before headache

IRESH ZAKER

French winger Ousmane Dembele was one of the luckiest men in the world on Wednesday. While his team made it to the final of Qatar 2022, he had come away from the match against Morocco without making any meaningful contribution. Why is the latter a good thing, you ask? It is because Dembele's wife, and TikTok star, Rima Edbouche is from Morocco.

Anyone who is or has been married will fully commiserate with Ousmane's dilemma: you never want to be hung with the blame for booting your in-laws out of a World Cup and, at the same time, you never want to exit the World Cup yourself.

After the latest performance, Dembele can honestly absolve himself of any role in Morocco's depressing fate before he celebrated his own country's good fortune. A masterful example of cutting the cake and having it too, if ever there was one.

It is with a heavy heart that we bid farewell to the Atlas Lions. These guys did not just come to pull off upsets, they set up to win the whole damned thing. The way Achraf Hakimi, Sofyan Amrabat, their defence and midfield in general, combined to play out of the back is the stuff of dreams. It was football of the highest quality, befitting any team that has ever played on the biggest stage, but until the final third.

There was some bad luck to be sure, but Morocco lacked the edge where it mattered the most. And we, the football lovers, were left poorer for it. I do hope though that they continue this amazing run. I think the time is ripe for a champion to emerge from outside Europe and South America.

What Morocco was lacking, France possess in copious amounts: the ability to score. And their impressive arsenal is about to be bolstered by the return of one Karim Benzema who, in case you forgot, is the reigning Ballon d'Or winner.

One could be reasonably sceptical about how well Benzema can suddenly fit into a team that has enough rhythm to make it all the way with even ease. One could rightfully ask whether Benzema should even be in the starting eleven. Do you retain the team that is playing well, or do you play one of the most fearsome strikers in the world? It is a problem of riches that could potentially give Didier Deschamps a monster of a headache.

But for one Ousmane Dembele as well, who as I previously said was the luckiest man in the world on Wednesday, who could find himself warming a balmy Qatari bench on the eighteenth. But one can't always win, whether in life or in football.

PHOTO: AFP

France put an end to Morocco's dream run after they came into the semifinal as favourites but it didn't matter much to the thousands of Moroccans who flooded to Doha to cheer their team on. Despite the defeat, Moroccans earned the respect of fans and experts alike and they held their heads high while waving their fans goodbye.