

THE LATERAL VIEW

Another chance to witness Maghreb glory

IRESH ZAKER



I must say that I did never much hold to the World Cup's third-place decider. It has always seemed unfair to me to ask players, already reeling from the heartbreak of missing the finals, to suit up once again; and that too for the eighth time in a month no less, for a match that no one really seems to care much about.

Sometimes it almost feels like a slap in the face. Take Germany for example. They have played in the fixture on five soul-crushing occasions. I bet not many members of those German teams have their medals hanging from their living rooms walls, or wherever they hang those things. For England, it has historically been an occasion to demonstrate their talent following being frustrated on the big stage.

No, I am not a big fan of this particular event. Except, maybe, this time around.

Because, this time, we get to witness the Atlas Lions in all their Maghreb glory one more time. Exactly how much the injury depleted squad will be up for one more run around, with the tireless Croatians no less, is questionable. The opportunity to listen to the indefatigable Moroccan faithful, however, will be worth the price of admission alone. And not to mention the one last chance to see adorable mothers dancing with their lovely sons.

Here's a piece of trivia. Did you know that the only time that the third-fourth place match was not held was during the very first World Cup, in 1930? That edition was special for all sorts of reasons: the referees wore suits, the Bolivians played in berets, and the chief and only selector for the Romanian team was their king.

That edition was, of course, hosted and won by the Uruguayans. The European teams went together by steamship along the way, picking up the Selecao, including Jules Rimet with the trophy in a suitcase. The only African representatives, Egypt, were supposed to join the Europeans and Brazilians, but they were late and literally missed the boat. An error that Arsene Wenger is still trying to correct, and avoid, by fielding forty-eight teams in 2026.

Things in 1930 could not have been more different than 2022, except that one semi-final between Argentina and USA descended into a massive brawl after one American player got his leg broken, one had his teeth knocked out, and one went to the hospital with stomach wounds. The US manager himself ran out to join the melee, but somehow broke a bottle of chloroform and knocked himself out.

Hmm, a brouhaha during a feisty knockout game featuring the Argentinians. I guess, the more things change the more they stay the same.

(I thank my friend Asif Sattar for a valuable lesson in World Cup history)



In anticipation of a blockbuster World Cup final at the Lusail Stadium on Sunday, fans in Qatar prepare paintings of France's Kylian Mbappe and Argentina's Lionel Messi and Julian Alvarez. Both Argentina and France will be battling it out for their third title in what will be a repeat of the 2018 World Cup's 7-goal last 16 thriller that was won by the eventual champions France, making this final even more exciting.

PHOTO: AFP

Magical Messi saves his best for last in Qatar

REUTERS

As if he had not made enough fairy-tales, Argentina's little genius Lionel Messi has saved the potentially most magical script for his last World Cup - with one line left to write.

With immense pressure on him to match the late great Diego Maradona and send the trophy back to Buenos Aires, Messi has lit up the Qatar tournament while others in the superstar stratum - Neymar, Cristiano Ronaldo - have underwhelmed and gone home.

From Argentina's opening game until their semifinal win over Croatia, Messi, near the end of his career and at his fifth World Cup aged 35, has been the tournament's out-and-out star.

His match statistics speak for themselves: six starts, five goals, three assists en route to Sunday's final against France.

Smashing so many records it is hard to keep track, Messi has beaten Maradona's tally of World Cup goals and appearances for Argentina, and on Sunday will jump ahead of Lothar Matthaeus' joint record 25-match appearances at the tournament.

Beyond the dazzling data, however, it has been Messi's mesmerising motion, and joyous celebrations, that have electrified

football fans around the world.

Spending large passages of play at walking pace and barely bothering to defend at times, Messi has waited for his moments, employing with deadly effect his low centre-of-gravity, stunning change of pace and shimmying runs with ball glued to feet.

He is "a sprite floating on the periphery of the game until the moment is right," wrote British sports writer Jonathan Wilson. "You can mark a man; much harder to mark a ghost."

After a shock opening upset by Saudi Arabia, it was Messi who rallied the team: five wins followed.

His best goal was a sumptuous low strike from outside the box against Mexico.

And pundits are still shaking their heads over his pinpoint pass to Nahuel Molina for Argentina's first goal against the Netherlands in the quarterfinal. What made it remarkable, and a candidate for one of the all-time great assists, is that Messi did not look up yet found Molina with preposterous perfection.

It was in that game where Messi cemented his Qatari love affair with Argentine fans, who in the past have sometimes compared him harshly against Maradona's extrovert personality, passion for his country, and 1986 World Cup

triumph.

After scoring a penalty to send Argentine fans into delirium, the usually impeccably-behaved Messi ran towards the Dutch bench cupping his ears in a provocative gesture.

Then after the game, he confronted a Dutch striker with a jibe caught on camera: "What are you looking at, fool?"

Though some pundits criticised him for disrespect, Argentine fans were largely delighted at the Maradona-like flashes of defiance from the introverted Messi.

However, everyone knows that true immortal parity with Maradona - at least in the biggest sporting tournament on earth - does still hinge on beating the French.

Many non-Argentines have long had Argentina as their second team, hoping Messi will win the World Cup if their own nation cannot to complete what would be a beautiful story.

But even should the unthinkable happen and Argentina lose, it seems he has won over a nation that now knows Messi loved the shirt every bit as much as Maradona, brought them wondrous moments over the years, and simply could not have tried harder or come closer to lifting the World Cup.

Argentina fans protest over World Cup final tickets

AFP, Doha

Argentina fans staged a second day of demonstrations Friday outside a Doha hotel demanding that their country's national federation help them to get tickets for the World Cup final.

Amid a growing frenzy ahead of Sunday's game against defending champions France, supporters said the cheapest official tickets are selling on underground markets for more than \$4,000.

Scores of fans gathered outside the Doha hotel where the Argentina Football Association is based. On Thursday night there were angry exchanges with officials outside the hotel. Some fans carried placards reading "AFA give us tickets".

The federation finally agreed to a meeting with a delegation of three fans.

Each country that qualified for the quarterfinals was given an extra allocation of tickets for matches they reached.

But with even more fans arriving from Argentina and France for the game, no announcement was made on whether more tickets will be made available.

The Lusail Iconic Stadium holds about 88,900 people but more than 30,000 Argentinians are reported to be in Qatar. Many have taken out loans to be in the Gulf state to see Lionel Messi's last bid to win a World Cup title.

Ticket negotiations are being held on a multitude of WhatsApp groups.

Some Argentinian fans showed AFP messages requesting more than \$4,000 for final tickets with a face value of \$750.

The most expensive tickets, which FIFA says should cost \$5,850, are being offered for more than \$14,000.

The Argentina association did not immediately comment on the availability of tickets.

Defier of odds, Croatia and Morocco hope to end on high

ATIQUA ANAM from Doha

Following morale-shattering defeats in their semifinals of the World Cup, Croatia and Morocco have the unenviable job of picking themselves up and getting prepared for the third-place decider on Saturday.

Both teams had exceeded expectations in their run to the last four - Croatia, who not many had expected to go that far with an aging side despite being the runners-up from last edition, and Morocco, the rank outsiders no-one had thought would progress past the group stage.

But here they are, a step away from winning the bronze medal in the World Cup. No matter how insignificant that prize seems to



be in the bigger context, both teams would want to leave Qatar on a high.

Walid Regragui, the Morocco coach who was appointed just months before the showpiece event and guided his team to the brink of a maiden World Cup final to everyone's surprise, did not hide his frustration at not being able to play the decisive last match.

"I understand it's important to finish third rather than fourth, but my takeaway is we didn't reach the final... We wanted to play the final

on Sunday, not play tomorrow," Regragui said at a press conference on Friday.

Emerging top from a group which also featured Belgium, Croatia and Canada, Morocco became the first Arab and African team to reach the last four of the showpiece event. The 47-year-old coach felt that what they achieved was of enormous importance to his country.

"But I told my players this is our seventh World Cup game. If you told any Morocco fan we would be

playing our seventh game on Dec. 17, they would be proud.

"Morocco played six World Cup games in 20-odd years and now we've played six games in a month - this is priceless. It's as if we played two World Cups or even more, that's beautiful from an experience point of view," Regragui added.

Morocco and Croatia complete a full circle as these two teams kicked off their group with a goalless draw. As they meet each other again, the coach feels both teams will certainly

want to end the campaign on a high.

"There was a lot of hesitation for the first game... Both teams will want to win it (on Saturday) and it will be a great game," Regragui said.

Croatia, meanwhile, will be a little more disappointed for failing to match their achievement from four years ago when they eventually settled for a runners-up finish.

For them it represents an opportunity missed to crown their golden generation of players, with coach Zlatko Dalic confirming most

of them will not play in the next World Cup.

Perhaps that is the reason Croatia are a bit more desperate to end in third position, a feat they had achieved back in 1998 in their debut appearance.

"I told the players they need to keep their heads up, be proud of giving their maximum and be ready, we must prepare to fight for third place," Dalic told reporters on Thursday.

Forward Andrej Kramaric dismissed the idea that the third-place playoff is an empty contest, suggesting the winner will become immortal.

"Eight of us from [the tournament in] Russia understand that feeling of winning a medal at the World Cup."

"We have a lot of players who haven't experienced that and would love to do that because it's something that will stay with you for the rest of their life," Kramaric said.

If Croatia win, it will be a third tournament medal in their short World Cup history of 24 years while Morocco, regardless of the result, will go down as the greatest World Cup side in African and Arab world's history.

INFO ZONE		
CROATIA VS MOROCCO		
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH	
Croatia 1	Luka Modric (Croatia)	Sofyan Amrabat (Morocco)
Morocco 0	Caps 161	
Draw 1	Goals 23	Caps 45