

## World Cup hits and misses

AFP, DOHA

From Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe dazzling, Morocco overachieving to Cristiano Ronaldo discovering his place in the sidelines, there have been a number of hits and misses in the month-long festival of football.

### Overachievers

Morocco became the first African side and the first Arab team to reach the semifinals of a World Cup. And it was no fluke.

Walid Regragui's men, ranked 22nd in the world, beat Belgium and drew with Croatia on the way to topping their group before dumping 2010 champions Spain and Portugal out of the tournament.

Japan shocked Germany and Spain to top their group before losing on penalties to Croatia in the round of 16.

South Korea underlined the progress Asian football is making by beating Portugal to qualify from their group but came unstuck against Brazil in the first knockout round.

### Superstars shine

Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe, who will go head to head in Sunday's final, have certainly lived up to their



Fans of two World Cup finalists -- France and Argentina -- flocked to the Lusail Stadium hours before the kickoff on Sunday, cheering and waving flags of their respective nations. While France hope to be the first nation in 60 years to successfully defend the title, Lionel Messi hopes to bring his nation their first in 36 years. PHOTO: REUTERS

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# All roads lead TO LUSAIL

ATIQUE ANAM FROM DOHA

Vamos Argentina has been the resounding choir on match days and non-match days, among Argentina fans who made up a majority of the Qatar 2022 fanbase. Now there was Allez Les Bleus -- another choir to rival that. Maybe the roars of 'Allez Les Bleus' was not as deafening as La Albiceleste's 'Vamos Argentina', but certainly equal in expectation and fervour.

Ahead of the final on Sunday, there was a large contingent of France fans, some of whom had been in Doha since the beginning of the World Cup and others joining them late as the French went head to head with Argentina in hopes of defending the title.

Francois Antoniette from Paris was chanting Allez Les Bleus at the top of his voice at Doha's central marketplace of Souq Waqif, a popular destination for tourists to hang out and enjoy traditional Arab food, since midday.

"France will definitely be the champions. No Messi, he's too old for this," Antoniette announced to the cheer from his fellow Frenchmen.

"We are the best in the world and despite injuries and sickness we are in the final," the Parisian said as he was thronged by a host of TV channels and reporters looking to hear his side of the story among the overwhelming Argentina support.

It was a busy day in Doha, which woke up with the expectation of a grandstand finish to a month-long football festival, which has not only left its mark on the football pitch but also in the lives of the people.

Having a cue that the metros will be awfully packed, with majority of the commuters heading for the

Lusail Iconic Stadium, this reporter and some of his colleagues decided to take the media shuttle bus to the destination. It proved to be a much better choice even though the streets had way too many cars for a working day in Doha, leading to quite a few stoppages at traffic intersections.

All the roads, it seemed, were leading to the Lusail Iconic Stadium -- the 88,966-seater bowl-shaped stadium in the state-of-the-art metropolis of Lusail, built for an estimated cost of \$45b. None of those lucky 88,966 people were going to miss the spectacle of the final and the sideshow in the buildup to the final.

As the bus approached the stadium, it dawned on us as to how massive the traffic was and how difficult it was for ordinary people to make it to the venue, despite having a disciplined transport system in place. The media people were privileged, though, as our bus dropped us at the foot of the stadium, an hour ahead of the

scheduled kickoff. Inside the stadium premises, there was a sea of people clad in the sky blue and white of Argentina, the home kit that the team wore in the final, singing 'Vamos Argentina, Vamos Messi' all along their way to the galleries.

Angelina, one of the Argentina fans among the thousands, said she had to walk miles after getting off the metro at the nearest station to get into the venue. But it would be worth all that hassle, she said, if Argentina were to lift the trophy. She hasn't certainly watched the Albiceleste win the world title and was willing to exhaust herself to witness it firsthand.

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## Wanted to make fans more proud: Regragui

REUTERS, Doha

Morocco will leave Qatar proud and happy after becoming the first African or Arabic team to reach the last four at a World Cup but they should strive for more in the future, coach Walid Regragui said on Saturday.

Morocco were beaten 2-1 by Croatia on Saturday in the third-place playoff, but Regragui lauded his young players saying they did everything he asked of them in the tournament, having beaten elite teams including Belgium, Portugal and Spain on their way to the semifinals.

"We wanted to bring joy to our fans but we're still happy, we're among the four best teams in the world," Regragui told reporters.

"We provided everyone with a good show, we never gave up. Congratulations to Croatia, they deserve their third place. We are a young team that is still learning."

Regragui said that his side, who had the best defensive record in Qatar before losing 2-0 to France on Wednesday, felt the physical toll of an intense tournament after playing their seventh match.

"Sure, I am a little disappointed by this second consecutive defeat, but we did everything that we could," Regragui said.

"Physically it was difficult, our players got tired, it was very intense. We wanted to make the fans more proud than they already were, that's it."



# Breakout stars of the 2022 World Cup



AFP, DOHA

The 2022 World Cup may have been the last hurrah for Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, but the tournament also witnessed the arrival of a new crop of talented young players. Here, we look at some of the rising stars who shone during the finals in Qatar.

### JUDE BELLINGHAM (ENGLAND)

England teenager Jude Bellingham arrived in Qatar tipped as a potential World Cup star and left as one of the hottest properties in global football.

The Borussia Dortmund player -- a modern box-to-box midfielder -- opened England's account at the tournament with a fine header in the team's 6-2 romp against Iran.

The 19-year-old also shone in the 3-0 quarterfinal win against Senegal, crossing



for Jordan Henderson to stroke home the first and driving through the midfield to launch the attack that led to the second.

### CODY GAKPO (NETHERLANDS)

The 23-year-old Dutch forward was the only player to score in all three group games as he carried over his red-hot form for PSV Eindhoven onto the biggest stage.

Gakpo's header in the Netherlands' opening match against Senegal broke the deadlock late on in a 2-0 victory. He drilled the Dutch ahead with a fierce left-footed drive against Ecuador in a 1-1 draw and again set the Oranje on their way with another tidy finish as they beat Qatar 2-0.

Gakpo did not add any more goals but still played his part as Louis van Gaal's side only succumbed on penalties to Argentina in the quarterfinals.



### GONCALO RAMOS (PORTUGAL)

The forward showed he has the potential to be the successor to Cristiano Ronaldo at international level, seizing his opportunity in sensational style when he was selected ahead of Portugal's captain for the 6-1 demolition of Switzerland in the last 16.

Known as "Pistoleiro" for his gun-toting celebration, Ramos shot his way into world football's consciousness with a hat-trick on his full debut.

The 21-year-old took just 17 minutes to open the scoring and achieve something Ronaldo never has -- net in a World Cup knockout game.

Ramos could not replicate his heroics as Portugal lost in the quarterfinals, but the Benfica striker has time on his side and will surely get a long run in the team.



### JULIAN ALVAREZ (ARGENTINA)

The 22-year-old striker is the latest to roll off Argentina's conveyor belt of attacking talent.

A year that began with a high-profile transfer from River Plate to Premier League champions Manchester City ended with the forward being acclaimed as one of the brightest talents in world football after a dazzling World Cup.

Left on the bench for Argentina's opening two group games, Alvarez started and scored in a 2-0 win over Poland and then netted a crucial second goal in the 2-1 last-16 win over Australia.

Another solid showing against the Netherlands was followed by two goals in the semifinal win over Croatia.

### JOSKO Gvardiol (CROATIA)

The 20-year-old defender rose to prominence



on the biggest stage with a series of excellent displays during Croatia's run to the semifinals.

Gvardiol's World Cup was nearly over before it started after he fractured his nose and suffered severe swelling around his right eye while playing for RB Leipzig last month, forcing him to wear a protective mask in Qatar.

Not only was the centre-back easy to spot, but he stood out for his unforgiving defending and comfort on the ball. His tackle on Romelu Lukaku late in Croatia's final group match spared them an early exit.

He then helped nullify Brazil's attacking threats in a shock quarterfinal win on penalties and capped off an impressive tournament with the opening goal in a man-of-the-match display against Morocco in the third place play-off.