

HAALAND announces arrival

REUTERS

Carrying the hopes of his nation on his shoulders, Norway striker Erling Haaland announced his arrival at the World Cup in typically emphatic fashion, with two goals in a majestic display as his side hammered Iraq 4-1 on Wednesday.

The irrepressible Haaland's first-half double means he has now scored on his debut in the German Bundesliga, the English Premier League, the Champions League and the World Cup finals, and few doubted that he would deliver on the biggest international stage.

Despite the scoreline, Norway struggled to stamp their authority on the game and there were plenty of miscues and poor passes, but Haaland saved the day, stepping up and scoring the first and second goals that set his side on course for victory.

In an otherwise very open Norway camp, Haaland rarely speaks to the media, preferring instead to let his goals do the talking, and no matter what Iraq tried in the first half, they couldn't keep him silent.

His first goal was a classic poacher's finish from David Moller Wolfe's ball across the box, and his second came about after his pressure on the Iraqi defence forced a weak back-pass, and he blocked the goalkeeper's attempted clearance into the net.

As Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Stoere pointed out the day before the game, individuals score goals but teams win matches, and everyone in Stale Solbakken's side has the same attacking purpose - put Haaland in a position to score, and let him do the rest.

But not everyone managed to do so in Norway's first game at a men's World Cup finals since 1998, and captain and playmaker Martin Odegaard was surprisingly quiet in midfield, while the defence was caught ball-watching for Iraq's equaliser from Aymen Hussein.

The result puts Norway on top of the group on three points, ahead of France, who beat Senegal 3-1 earlier in the day, on goal difference, and Haaland warned that his side will have to perform much better.

For now, he and the Norwegian fans will take a moment to celebrate their winning return to the World Cup after a 28-year absence.

"It's fantastic. Everyone expected us to win and fortunately we did, no banana skins. I don't know what time it is in Norway, but I hope people are partying a bit," Haaland grinned.

A morning painted in sky blue

ANISUR RAHMAN

Like any other day, I set out in the morning for the Azimpur branch of Viqarunnisa Noon School with my child. However, compared to previous days, yesterday's morning felt distinctly different as there were fewer pedestrians and fewer rickshaws on the road.

Even the traffic on Mirpur Road was noticeably thin. At the Nilkhet intersection, three passengers got off a bus wearing Argentina's away jerseys and walked towards Dhaka University.

Reaching the Azimpur intersection, I spotted rickshaws carrying young passengers clad in Argentina's home jerseys, heading towards Dhaka University via Palashi.

It did not take long to figure out the reason: the reigning world champions Argentina were about to step into their first hurdle of the FIFA World Cup; and the 7:00 am kick-off played its part in the crowd and traffic being thin.

During the last World Cup, several spots across the Dhaka University campus had transformed into human oceans during Argentina and Brazil matches — a phenomenon that captivated the global football fraternity. It was likely the urge not to miss that electric atmosphere that drove this influx of Argentina fans towards the campus once again.



After dropping my daughter at the school gate, my journey was interrupted by a crowd inside the Government Officers' Quarter next to the school. Unable to resist, I joined them to watch the match on a giant screen. The crowd was a diverse mix of football fans — from schoolchildren to elderly citizens out for a morning walk, all standing side by side. The presence of women in Argentina jerseys was particularly striking.

A giant digital screen had been set up beneath the Ladies' Conference Hall of the Government Officers' Quarter. Fans in Argentina's iconic sky-blue-and-white filled the front rows, while Brazil jerseys were also sprinkled in between.

Students from nearby schools, still in uniform and with guardians, had paused to watch Argentina play.

Even at this early hour, a peanut vendor did brisk business, turning the venue into a mini-stadium.

The crowd erupted at every move from Messi and his teammates. Soon after kick-off, Messi scored — a long-awaited moment triggering wild celebrations. However, VAR instantly silenced the crowd, giving sudden voice to the minority rooting for an Argentina slip-up. Soon after, when Algeria scored and VAR disallowed it again, the Albiceleste faithful burst into cheers.

The match continued amid rising tension. A minor gridlock of rickshaws and motorcycles inside the quarter briefly disrupted movement. A sharp whistle from a security guard shifted attention from the screen, while a school van driver searched for a missing student named Hanzala. Guardians

tugged at children to leave, but many refused, glued to the screen. Several children in Argentina jerseys even sat directly in front of it.

By then, the holders had taken the lead through Messi. Debate broke out instantly. "Argentina is not even getting the ball," complained one fan, to which another replied, "We are ahead, and that's why they're defending more." Another added, "One goal is enough."

Everything became a reason to celebrate — a stray dog crossing the screen, broadcast buffering, even coach Lionel Scaloni shouting instructions.

During the second-half hydration break, an Argentina supporter appeared with a flag and a bottle of soft drink, 7Up, triggering fresh laughter and chants.

Argentina were now two goals ahead, both from Messi. He soon came close to a hat-trick, but the Algerian goalkeeper produced a brilliant save. Algeria countered briefly but failed to convert. "Go on, Algeria!" shouted a lone voice, met with amused smiles. The result already felt settled.

Outside, the morning heat intensified, but shifting clouds and a breeze made conditions bearable, amplifying the Argentina fans' satisfaction after seeing Messi's historic hat-trick set their journey towards another World Cup dream in motion.



PHOTO: AFP/X

Tense battles await

STAR SPORTS DESK

The 2026 FIFA World Cup group stages are intensifying as nations are fighting for match winning points that pave their path to the knockout rounds early. As the matches progress, the pressure intensifies making every encounter a battle for survival.

Group A action returns as the Czechia and South Africa lock horns in Atlanta, with both the teams looking for a vital response after their opening match losses.

Czechia manager Miroslav Koubek will be pinning hopes on Patrik Schick's attacking prowess and the physical presence of Tomas Soucek in midfield after their 2-1 loss with South Korea. Meanwhile, the South African side are looking to score their first goal of this tournament after a 2-0 defeat from co-host Mexico. The South African team led by

Hugo Broos struggled offensively in their first match, and are looking to find a breakthrough against a resilient Czech defense if they hope to keep their qualification dreams alive.

In the other Group A encounter, co-hosts Mexico, with a vibrant home crowd advantage, are looking forward to building on their commanding start and maintain their position at the top of the table against South Korea.

Korea, equally formidable after their own opening victory, bring speed and technical precision to the pitch. Both teams have proved they can find the back of the net, setting the stage for an intense affair, with winners likely to secure an early ticket to the Round of 32.

Group B action sees Canada face Qatar at a defining moment in Vancouver as they chase their first-ever World Cup victory after

a 1-1 draw against Bosnia and Herzegovina. After a tense opener, Canada are looking to recapture their form by a potential return of their captain Alphonso Davies. Meanwhile, Qatar return with a newfound confidence following a 1-1 draw against Switzerland in their first game.

Switzerland square off against Bosnia in Los Angeles, with the Swiss looking to affirm their status as group heavyweights with a win. They will rely on their captain Granit Xhaka to dictate the tempo to bounce back from a shock draw in their first match.

On the other hand, Bosnia would be banking on their disciplined mid-block to upset the Swiss and capitalise on any lapses in concentration. With both teams seeking to improve upon their opening-round draws, the midfield battle will be the decisive theater of this match.

Tigers fall to Australia's wind 'trap' and lacklustre approach

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh pace-bowling coach Talha Jubair admitted that a failure to build middle-order partnerships after quick wickets left them short of a competitive total, resulting in a four-wicket defeat to Australia in the first T20I at the Bir Sreshtho Flight Lieutenant Matiur Rahman Stadium in Chattogram on Wednesday.

Bangladesh initially had a decent start with the bat before both Tanzid Hasan Tamim and Saif Hassan fell to loose shots on a slightly tacky wicket. Although the powerplay yielded 52 runs for two wickets, a familiar collapse ensued as they lost their next five wickets for 34 runs in just 34 deliveries.

Adam Zampa and Joel Davies capitalised during this period, dismantling the innings by removing Tawhid Hridoy, Soumya Sarkar, and Parvez Hossain Emon.

"We hurried ourselves a bit. We had a good Powerplay but could not carry on from there," Talha



Jubair said at the post-match press conference.

"Had we built partnerships of 30-40 runs, we could have anchored the innings. We knew it

wasn't a 200-run wicket, but because the start was good, our batters got carried away when they began connecting their shots."

Bangladesh's batters failed to take the wind into account, which Australia utilised to brilliant effect. Soumya and Emon attempted big shots but failed to clear the rope, falling for 17 and 10 respectively.

"The shot Emon got out to would have been a big six without the wind, but the ball didn't clear the field," Jubair noted.

"We fell into their trap. They wanted us to hit against the wind and mistime our shots. There was a need for sensible batting, but back-to-back wickets fell."

Bangladesh were eventually bowled out for 131 in 19 overs, despite Mahedi Hasan's unbeaten 22-ball 29, leaving them to regret not playing their full quota.

Australian debutant Davies, who claimed three wickets alongside Zampa, outlined they had indeed set a trap.

"With the wind blowing towards the longer boundary, Mitchell [Marsh] suggested making them hit into it. I got two wickets from that, so it was a nice plan by him."



AUSSIES ROMP PAST TIGRESSES

Australia's Ellyse Perry (R) and Georgia Voll celebrate beating Bangladesh by nine wickets in the ICC Women's T20 World Cup match at Headingley, Leeds on Wednesday. Batting first, Bangladesh posted 77/8 in their 20 overs after Nigar Sultana's sluggish 27 off 47 balls, which Australia comfortably chased down in 9.3 overs losing only one wicket. Voll remained unbeaten on 45 while Perry scored 19.

PHOTO: AFP