

“The World Cup is being sold. That robs football of credibility... This game is a perfect means for humanity to negotiate their coexistence. But football is also tugged at by figures who have something else in mind, something shady.”

Former Germany captain **Philipp Lahm** slams FIFA



Benjamin Asare's response to keeping England at bay was as composed as his performance in goal at Boston Stadium. The Ghana goalkeeper played a crucial role as the Black Stars frustrated England to secure a valuable 0-0 draw in Group L, earning Ghana a second consecutive FIFA World Cup 2026 clean sheet after the 1-0 win over Panama. “It’s normal. For me, this is my job. It’s just what I’m supposed to do out there on the pitch. Sure, playing against Harry Kane is all part of the job. It’s nothing out of the ordinary,” said Asare.

PHOTO: REUTERS

‘No worries, no stress, no drama’

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Jude Bellingham said England suffered a recurrence of “second game fever” as they were held to a disappointing 0-0 draw by Ghana at the World Cup on Tuesday.

Nico O'Reilly hit the bar late on and Harry Kane blazed over the rebound as Ghana's dogged defensive display forced England to settle for a point in the Group L game in Foxborough.

They were perhaps fortunate to avoid a worse outcome after Ezri Konsa's clumsy challenge on Ghana forward Prince Adu in the area went unpunished.

It is the fourth consecutive major tournament where England have started with a win before drawing their second match, which was not lost on Bellingham after he earned his 50th cap against the Black Stars.

“Very frustrating. Like, second game fever, you know, the same as always with us,” said the Real Madrid midfielder. “It feels like in all the tournaments I’ve been to, it’s been the same, a decent performance to start and a good win.

“And then just the second one frustrated a little bit with how they defended, how they set up... credit to them. They got exactly out of the game what they played for, couldn’t quite break them down.”

England are still heavy favourites to win the group and face a third-placed team in the last 32, with Panama their next opponents in New Jersey on Saturday. Thomas Tuchel's side are level on four points with Ghana but have the better goal difference after their 4-2 victory over Croatia last

week.

Bellingham insisted there was no cause for concern in the England camp following the Ghana result and said the focus would now turn to Panama.

England thrashed Panama 6-1 in the group stage of the 2018 World Cup in Russia, a match in which Kane scored a hat-trick.

“It’s important for us not to get too negative, not to get too het up on it,” said Bellingham.

“No worries, no stress, no drama at all in there.”



The final call is still human

ATIQUE ANAM

For years, football authorities have promoted technology as the answer to the game's biggest controversies. Goal-line technology, semi-automated offside systems and the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) were all introduced in a bid to make the sport fairer and more accurate. Yet the 2026 FIFA World Cup is proving that while technology can provide evidence, the final decision still rests with human beings – and that remains the source of many of football's biggest disputes.

Among the tournament's new officiating regulations, none has attracted more attention than FIFA's decision to allow referees to issue a straight red card when a player covers his mouth while engaging in what is deemed a



Aissa Mandi, despite similar incidents frequently resulting in red cards in both international and club football.

Questions of consistency have surfaced elsewhere. Uzbekistan were left aggrieved when Azizjon Ganiev's superb goal against Portugal was disallowed after a foul was detected in the build-up. Yet pundits noted that a broadly similar challenge involving Alexis Mac Allister during Argentina's match against Algeria went unpunished, allowing play to continue and a goal to stand.

Football, of course, has never been free from refereeing controversy. The sport's history is littered with disputed decisions, from the notorious allegations surrounding the 1934 World Cup in Italy and the 1978 tournament in Argentina to the controversies involving Belgium and the Soviet Union in 1986, England and Cameroon in 1990, and South Korea's remarkable run to the semifinals in 2002. There was also the match between England and Germany in which the former were denied a goal after goalkeeper Manuel Neuer retrieved the ball from the behind the goal line following Frank Lampard's long-ranger which had crossed the line. This was a pivotal point in incorporating Goal-line technology.

The introduction of VAR at the 2018 World Cup was meant to reduce such debates, and in many respects it has succeeded. Clear offside errors have become rarer, while goal-line disputes have virtually disappeared.

Yet the final judgement still belongs to the officials interpreting it. Whether on the pitch or inside the VAR booth, those decisions are shaped by individual judgement and can sometimes be influenced by the stature of teams, the reputation of players or external pressures.

That is the uncomfortable reality of modern football. Technology has reduced mistakes, but it has not removed controversy. As long as final calls are being made by human beings, debates over fairness, consistency and bias will continue.

confrontational exchange with an opponent.

Before the tournament, FIFA's head of refereeing, Pierluigi Collina, stressed that covering one's mouth had not been banned outright. Players would still be free to do so during friendly conversations. The offence, he explained, occurs when the gesture is used during a confrontation.

Paraguay's Miguel Almiron became the first player dismissed under the rule against Turkiye after VAR advised a red card due to a confrontation between the two players. Yet England midfielder Jude Bellingham escaped punishment after being photographed covering his mouth while speaking to Ghana's Jordan Ayew during Tuesday's goalless draw, deemed to not have been in a confrontational manner.

The problem, however, lies in determining where friendly interaction ends and confrontation begins. How can officials know precisely what was said when the conversation is deliberately concealed? If a player makes an offensive

remark without obvious aggression or without provoking a complaint from the opponent, does it still warrant punishment? Ultimately, such decisions depend on interpretation rather than hard evidence.

The same concerns resurfaced later in that match. Ghana felt they had been denied a clear penalty when Ezri Konsa appeared to bring down Prince Kwabena Adu inside the area. Replays suggested contact with the midfielder's knee while the ball remained untouched, yet neither the referee nor VAR intervened.

Ghana coach Carlo Queiroz responded with biting sarcasm afterwards.

“Once again VAR went for a coffee. I'm not sure VAR is still working in the World Cup. We still have VAR? It's working?” he remarked.

Such frustrations have become a recurring theme throughout the tournament. Lionel Messi escaped even a booking after a studs-up challenge above the ankle on Algeria defender



Norway celebration draws Nordic envy

Norway's success at the World Cup has triggered euphoria at home, but the team's trademark “Viking row” celebration is beginning to test the patience of their Scandinavian neighbours, drawing shrugs from Sweden and envy from Denmark.

“I am never going to do it. We just sigh. Perhaps mostly at the TV crew who choose to zoom in on it every single time,” Sweden defender Gustaf Lagerbielke told reporters. “It is very similar to the Icelandic volcano, after all. But, whatever floats your boat.”

Yet while the Swedes can remain focused on their own camp, the Danes, absent from the tournament after a qualification playoff defeat to the Czech Republic, are finding the Norwegian euphoria much harder to stomach.

Senegal suffer Mendy blow

A knee injury sustained during Monday's loss to Norway has ruled out Senegal keeper Edouard Mendy from Friday's World Cup match against Iraq, his national team said on Wednesday.

Mendy suffered the injury while trying to make a save, and he left the field in the 63rd minute with Norway leading 3-1. Norway won 3-2 after Ismaila Sarr scored his second goal in added time.

Media reports said Mendy, 34, had suffered a ligament issue.

Senegal and Iraq are both coming off two losses going into their final Group I game in Toronto.



Travel curbs eased for Iran

The United States will ease travel restrictions imposed on the Iranian team during the World Cup, allowing them to arrive in Seattle two days before their next match, the US Department of Homeland Security said Tuesday.

Iran team officials complained they could only arrive for matches in Los Angeles one day before kick-off – and had to leave almost as soon as the match was over.

“The Iran team will still be required to leave the day the match ends. The overall security measures and protocol are the same,” a department spokesperson said.

Team Melli, who play Egypt on Friday, drew 2-2 with New Zealand in their first game before holding a 10-man Belgium to a 0-0 draw.

Iran coach Amir Ghalenoei praised his squad for managing two ties in what he said were trying conditions. He has previously said Iran is the “most oppressed team in the World Cup.”



‘The star is Colombia’: Munoz shuns spotlight

AGENCIES

When Colombia needed a hero against DR Congo, few expected it to be Daniel Munoz. Yet on a tense night where the spotlight shone brightest on Luis Diaz and James Rodriguez, it was the relentless right-back who delivered the decisive moment, scoring a late winner to secure a 1-0 victory and send Los Cafeteros into the FIFA World Cup 2026 Round of 32.

The Crystal Palace defender thought he had opened the scoring after just eight minutes, only for a VAR review to rule the effort offside. For much of the match, DR Congo goalkeeper Lionnel Mpsi and his determined defense frustrated Colombia's attack.

But with the game drifting toward a stalemate, Juan Fernando Quintero produced a moment of brilliance, threading a perfectly weighted pass into the path of Munoz. The defender surged forward and calmly finished, finally breaking Congo's resistance and sparking celebrations among the Colombian faithful.

Despite being named player of the match, Munoz refused to take individual credit.

“Just because I scored the goal doesn’t mean I’m the star. We’re all the stars. We all earned these three points. This is a family, and here, the star is Colombia,” he said after the match.

“The effort of the entire team deserves recognition. Nothing is easy; nobody is getting anything for free.”

The goal continued an impressive run for the 28-year-old, who also opened the scoring in Colombia's 3-1 victory over Uzbekistan earlier in the tournament. His knack for arriving in dangerous positions has become a hallmark of his game, despite spending most of his career as a defender.

Born in Amali, Antioquia, Muñoz took a long road to the top. After developing at Rionegro Aguilas and later starring for Atletico Nacional, he earned a move to Belgian side Genk, where his attacking instincts flourished. Across four seasons in Belgium, he registered 19 goals and 20 assists, establishing himself as one of the league's most dynamic full-backs.

His form earned a transfer to Crystal Palace, where he quickly became a key figure. Under Oliver Glasner, Munoz has combined aggressive defending with attacking quality, helping Palace's resurgence in England.

The defender's influence extends to the national team as well. He scored twice during Colombia's run to the 2024 Copa America final and now has five international goals in 46 appearances. Against DR Congo, he once again proved that while Colombia's stars grab headlines, Daniel Munoz has a habit of deciding matches when it matters most.