



“This is a unique and important moment for me. But I preferred how I played against Senegal or against Iraq....I think I was much more influential in those games.”

Ousmane Dembele

● France have now scored at least three goals in each of their last four World Cup matches, the joint-longest run of 3+ goals in consecutive World Cup games, and the longest since Spain (1998-2002).

Erich Probst (24 minutes vs Czechoslovakia in 1954).

● He also became the first French player to score twice in the opening 20 minutes of a World Cup match, and only the

● Dembele scored a hatrick inside 32 minutes, the second-earliest hatrick in World Cup history, behind Austria's

second player to do so at this year's tournament, alongside Brian Brobbey for the Netherlands against Sweden.

“I don't think any of us ever dreamt of this. Today, qualifying for the next round is very rewarding for us...And playing against Argentina will be great for us. It's a dream for any player to play against Argentina and against Lionel Messi.”

Cape Verde goalkeeper Vozinha



Dembele, Mbappe shatter records

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France, tipped as one of the likeliest teams to go all the way in this World Cup in North America, showed exactly why on Saturday, with Ousmane Dembele and Kylian Mbappe combining to devastating effect and striking fear into opposition defences. Dembele scored one of the earliest hattricks in World Cup history, with Mbappe assisting two of his goals, as Les Bleus thrashed a second-string Norway 4-1 in their final Group I game in Boston. With both teams already securing a place in the Round of 32, Norway raised eyebrows by leaving premier striker Erling Haaland on the bench throughout the game.

● Dembele has now scored in back-to-back World Cup appearances, having failed to score in his first 12 matches in the competition.

● Mbappe now has 20 World Cup goal involvements (16 goals, 4 assists) since his 2018 debut -- more than any other player in that period, and two ahead of Lionel Messi (13 goals, 5 assists).

● At this tournament, Mbappe has been directly involved in six goals (4 goals, 2 assists), the most by any player in the group stage of a single World Cup since Miroslav Klose in 2002 (5 goals, 1 assist).

● Both Mbappe and Dembele are now on four goals each, making France the first team since Poland in 1974 to have two players reach that tally in a single World Cup

group stage.

● Since 1966, Mbappe and Dembele are only the third duo to combine for five World Cup goals, alongside Poland's Andrzej Szarmach and Grzegorz Lato, and Germany's Miroslav Klose and Michael Ballack.

● This is only the second time France have won all three group-stage matches at a World Cup; the previous occasion was in 1998, when they went on to win the tournament.

● Norway remain winless in their last six competitive matches without Erling Haaland in the starting XI (D3 L3), underlining their dependence on him.

● France will now face Sweden in the Round of 32, while Norway will meet Ivory Coast.

Cruel VAR margins, bitter fallout

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Iran's World Cup fate hanged by a thread after a dramatic 93rd-minute winner from Shoja Khalilzadeh was ruled out by VAR against Egypt on Saturday. The 1-1 draw sent Egypt through, leaving a heartbroken Iran stranded on three points and anxiously waiting on other results to determine if they can squeeze into the Round of 32.

The stadium erupted when Khalilzadeh slammed home a loose rebound during a chaotic set-piece scramble. However, the celebrations were cut short when



PHOTO: AFP

By initiating that secondary chaos and blocking a clean defensive clearance, the phase of play was corrupted from its inception, forcing the referee to disallow the goal.

The result sparked absolute fury within the Iranian camp, with captain Mehdi Taremi accusing FIFA of staging a "disaster World Cup."

"It's not fair," Taremi stated, pointing to severe logistics and recovery disadvantages.

"If they want us to be out, then OK; let's get out. But that's not fair. We have to fight against everything here."

Coach Amir Ghalenoei echoed the sense of injustice, lamenting the brutal margins of technology.

"Because of millimetres, our goal was ruled out. That's justice, but I'm upset by the bad luck," he said, referencing the pre-tournament visa restrictions that crippled his staff.

"I used to think we were an oppressed team, but we are also an unlucky team," Ghalenoei concluded.

second, two Iranian attackers were standing on the doorstep of the goal in an offside position.

While standing there is not an offence, it became an infraction the moment they engaged in the frantic goal-line scramble. FIFA dictates a player is penalised upon "becoming involved in active play by challenging an opponent... or making an obvious action which clearly impacts on the ability of an opponent to play the ball."

Law 11. Offside is judged at the exact microsecond a ball is touched by a teammate, not when the final shot is taken. According to the rulebook, the timing of the offside is judged "at the first point of contact of the play or touch by a teammate."

When a deep free-kick was floated into the box, an Iranian player flicked it deeper into the six-yard box. At that precise split

“I used to think we were an oppressed team, but we are also an unlucky team.”

Iran coach Amir Ghalenoei

Polish referee Szymon Marciniak was called to review the build-up. The disallowed goal boils down to the strict mechanics of FIFA's



Oldies but goodies

Belgium's much-criticised "oldies" finally answered their doubters in style, powering to a commanding 5-1 win over New Zealand in Vancouver on Saturday to seal top spot in Group G and book their place in the Round of 32. Leandro Trossard, 31, led the charge with a brace, while the veterans who had been singled out most for scrutiny stepped up when it mattered most, as Kevin De Bruyne (34) and Romelu Lukaku (33) also got on the scoresheet. Even the final goal from Alexis Saelemaekers (27) was assisted by Lukaku. The result saw Belgium finish level on points with Egypt but top the group on superior goal difference, a margin built decisively in this statement performance. Coach Rudi Garcia was quick to highlight the response from his experienced core, saying: "This is what the oldies did tonight, quote unquote... we are growing into it. We're gaining momentum." For a side questioned for relying on age, Belgium's leaders delivered the perfect reply when it mattered most.

PHOTO: AFP

GOAL RUSH IN NORTH AMERICA

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North America has already delivered a tournament full of extremes. From established contenders dismantling underdogs, to emerging sides punching above their weight, the 2026 World Cup has already written its share of shock narratives.

Beyond the upsets and storylines, the defining feature of this edition has been its sheer goal output. Even before the knockout stage, the tournament has produced a staggering 196 goals across 66 matches -- till the filing of this report. This already surpasses the previous record of 172 goals from 64 matches set in Qatar in 2022.

FIRST HALF VS SECOND HALF

● The second half has yielded 107 goals compared to 89 in the first half.
● Tactical reshuffles, higher pressing lines, and risk-heavy approaches in pursuit of points have collectively tilted the balance toward more second-half scoring.

EARLY STAGE GOAL RUSH

● The most dangerous phase of matches has been the early segment of the second half. Between the 45th and 60th minutes, teams have scored 33 goals.
● However, goal surges have not been limited to a single window. The opening 15 minutes of matches have produced 30 goals, as teams attempt to impose early dominance. Similarly,



the closing phase of regulation time (76-90 minutes) has also seen 30 goals.

STOPPAGE TIME DRAMA

● A remarkable 19 goals have already been scored beyond the 90-minute mark, compared to 23 in 64 matches in the last edition of the World Cup in 2022.

● This reinforces a growing modern trend: matches are no longer considered over at full



PHOTO: REUTERS

time. With extended stoppage periods and heightened urgency, teams continue to push forward relentlessly.

THE BIGGER STATISTICAL PICTURE

● The tournament's overall scoring rate stands at 2.97 goals per match -- the highest in 56 years.

● To put this in historical perspective, the last time a World Cup recorded the same average

was in 1970, also at 2.97 goals per match. Before this, it was the 1958 FIFA World Cup that saw an average of over three goals per match (3.60)

● Individual scoring trends also underline this attacking explosion. At the 2022 World Cup, four players reached four or more goals, while seven others scored at least three. In contrast, this edition has already seen five players cross the four-goal mark, with another

eight reaching at least three goals -- and the tournament is still ongoing.

REASONS BEHIND THE NUMBERS

● The expanded 48-team format has widened the competitive gap in the opening stages. Elite attacking sides have aggressively exploited structural weaknesses in debutant defences, producing high-margin scorelines -- such as Portugal, Germany, and Spain's dominant display against Uzbekistan, Curacao, and Saudi Arabia, respectively.

● With stricter officiating directives to ensure maximum effective playing time, including extended VAR checks and precise stoppage allocation, matches are frequently stretching beyond 100 minutes. The physical toll of this extended duration has led to increased late-game fatigue, resulting in more disorganised defensive phases and late goals.

● Technical analysis of the official match ball, Trionda, suggests an unpredictable, high-velocity flight pattern. Goalkeepers have struggled to consistently judge late movement, particularly from distance. This has directly contributed to an increase in long-range goals from elite finishers operating in transition and set-play scenarios.

If current trends continue, the tournament is not just on course to break the 300 goal barrier -- it may redefine the statistical ceiling of World Cup altogether, setting a benchmark that could stand untouched for generations.