

Another day, another record shattered by Lionel Messi. At this point, it feels like the Argentine maestro rewrites football history every single time he laces up his boots, setting milestones that he instantly begins extending. His masterful free-kick against Jordan didn't just cement his status as the game's ultimate long-range king, it added another chapter to an unprecedented legacy of longevity and clutch brilliance. With a flawless group stage campaign officially in the rearview mirror, Messi and co. now shift their undivided attention to the knockout rounds, locking eyes on a high-stakes Round of 32 clash against debutants Cape Verde.

- Messi became the first player in history to score in seven consecutive World Cup matches across two tournaments.
- He reached 6 goals from outside the box in World Cup history, breaking a tie with

Brazil legend Rivellino (5) for the all-time tournament record.

- Converted his second direct World Cup free-kick (adding to his 2014 strike vs. Nigeria), matching the all-time tournament record held by

David Beckham, Rivellino, and Bernard Genghini.

- Lo Celso and Messi's strikes made Argentina just the fourth team since 1966 to score two direct free-kicks in a single World Cup match.
- Messi extended his all-time

tournament scoring record to 19 goals, sitting three clear of Miroslav Klose and Kylian Mbappe.

- With 6 goals in just three matches, Messi leads the 2026 Golden Boot race heading into the Round of 32.

“Today he could have played 90 minutes and, without meaning any disrespect to the opponent, he could have further cemented his legendary status. But he preferred to let his teammates get playing time and focus on what’s to come.... He doesn’t dwell on those numbers that everyone talks about.”

Lionel Scaloni on Messi

Bend it like MESSI

PHOTO: REUTERS



England get the job done but cracks remain

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

England got the job done, but they will not earn extra points for style after a grafting 2-0 victory over Panama in their final Group I match at the FIFA World Cup in New Jersey yesterday.

Jude Bellingham starred with a goal and an assist for Harry Kane, whose strike took him past Gary Lineker's 11 goals to become England's all-time leading World Cup scorer. England finished top of the group and will face DR Congo in the Round of 32 on Wednesday.

It was a vintage tournament-England -- proof that, sometimes, the ends really do justify the means.

Fresh from a frustrating goalless draw against Ghana, England laboured for more than an hour before Bellingham finally broke the deadlock from a corner in the 62nd minute.

It was hardly the worst performance from Thomas Tuchel's troops, but it carried familiar echoes of the Ghana game. England monopolised possession against another compact low block, and yet again looked vulnerable whenever Panama hit them on the counter. And that is becoming a concerning pattern.

Tuchel, however, insists his side will grow into the tournament. "The bigger the games get, the bigger we will get," he said.

He may prove right. But England's displays suggest they have two unresolved problems -- breaking down disciplined low blocks and coping with transitions after losing possession.

Against both Ghana and Panama, England dominated the ball yet still allowed high-quality counter-attacking opportunities. Add the two goals conceded against Croatia and it is fair to say England have ridden their luck defensively despite conceding only twice.

Their attacking fluency has also faded after the exhilarating display against Croatia. Against Panama, Kane failed to register a first-half shot for the first time in seven World Cup appearances since England's opening match against Iran in Qatar 2022. Ultimately, it took a set piece and some generous defending to unlock the Canal Men.

"We did what was needed," Tuchel said. "It was what we expected: a tough match against a physical opponent. They are a difficult team to score against and we were the only team to create this amount of chances and score twice."

Is Tuchel's take actually true? If so, is he not inadvertently admitting England's problem of finding a way past low-block sides?

England have progressed with two wins and a draw, but it would be stretching the truth to call their group campaign convincing. Style has rarely defined England at major tournaments, although their opening victory over Croatia hinted that Tuchel's side might be different.

Instead, defensive uncertainty has come out as a big concern.

For all of Tuchel's optimism, it is difficult to ignore the feeling that stronger opponents will punish England if they continue to defend with such uncertainty -- making changes at the back almost every match and yet not finding a solid combination. Better forwards than Panama's are unlikely to be so forgiving.

The next challenge promises to look remarkably familiar. DR Congo are also likely to defend deep, stay compact and attack on the break, precisely the type of opponent that has troubled England throughout the group stage.

If Tuchel's side cannot find a more convincing answer to that tactical puzzle, their World Cup journey may end long before the biggest games arrive.

Ronaldo's endurance under spotlight

AGENCIES

Portugal's FIFA World Cup 2026 journey has moved from group tension into knockout pressure, with all attention now fixed on a Round of 32 showdown against Croatia, a matchup that could define the narrative around Cristiano Ronaldo's extraordinary minutes-heavy campaign.

Ronaldo played another full 90 minutes in Portugal's 0-0 draw with Colombia, a result that secured second place in Group K but also intensified scrutiny over his role in the team.

While many elite stars have been rotated across the tournament, Ronaldo has played every minute so far, becoming the central figure in both Portugal's attacking structure and the wider debate about age, workload, and tactical sacrifice.

Portugal head coach Roberto Martinez firmly defended his captain, rejecting external comparisons with other players. Martinez stressed that Portugal do not make selection decisions based on what other teams are doing. "Obviously we don't compare players in our team with other players... that would be childish and unprofessional," he said, emphasising that internal performance data guides every decision.



Across the tournament, other global icons have been carefully managed. Lionel Messi has been rested at key moments, while Norway's Erling Haaland has also been protected from full match loads. In contrast, Ronaldo's continuous presence has made him both indispensable and exposed, especially when Portugal struggle to sustain pressing intensity.

Against Colombia, Portugal were frequently outplayed in midfield

rhythm. James Rodríguez delivered the game's most creative moments, orchestrating attacks and linking play with the composure that once defined his peak World Cup form. Colombia's pace and width, driven by Luis Díaz, repeatedly stretched Portugal's defensive line, forcing key interventions from goalkeeper Diogo Costa.

Ronaldo's contribution remained limited to positioning and a single free-kick that failed to trouble Camilo

Vargas. Critics highlighted his reduced defensive work, but Martinez insisted his role is defined by timing and spatial intelligence rather than constant pressing.

The broader comparison with Messi intensified as the Argentine continued to influence matches even with managed minutes, reinforcing perceptions of efficiency versus endurance in elite veterans. Meanwhile, Rodriguez's resurgence added another layer to the tournament's theme of experienced playmakers still shaping decisive moments.

Now Portugal face Croatia in the Round of 32, a clash scheduled to test their tactical discipline and emotional control. Croatia's structured midfield and tournament experience make them one of the most difficult knockout opponents, capable of slowing games into tight, calculated battles.

For Martinez, the challenge is balancing continuity with adaptation. His system has kept faith in Ronaldo's experience, but Croatia may demand more collective pressing and faster transitions to break defensive organization. Whether Ronaldo can still provide decisive moments in such a controlled match could determine Portugal's survival.

This time for Africa

AGENCIES

DR Congo punched their ticket to the FIFA World Cup knockout rounds on Sunday, completing a seismic group stage that has fundamentally altered the balance of world football. The Leopards' progression seals an unprecedented, record-breaking milestone.

Out of the 10 African countries that arrived at the 2026 tournament, nine have survived for the Round of 32. Joining DR Congo in this historic vanguard are continental powerhouses and fearless dark horses alike: Morocco, Egypt, South



PHOTO: REUTERS

● With nine teams qualifying, Africa has set the absolute record for the most nations from a single continent outside of Europe to ever reach the knockout rounds of a single World Cup.

● Prior to this tournament, only six African nations in history had ever reached a World Cup knockout match; this single campaign has comfortably beaten that cumulative historical record in one go.

● The contrast between the two newly expanded continents was stark: while 90% of African teams moved on, a dismal 22% of Asian Football Confederation sides (only Japan and Australia) managed to survive.



SCAN QR CODE FOR FULL ROUND OF 32 FIXTURES

Africa, Ivory Coast, Cape Verde, Senegal, Ghana, and Algeria.

Prior to this tournament, only six African nations in the entirety of football history had ever tasted a World Cup knockout match. In a single stroke, that reality has been completely rewritten.

Africa's allocation of qualifiers was

doubled from the last World Cup and other than a troubled Tunisia, who conceded 12 goals in three defeats, they have more than merited more representation on the global stage. It shows the growth and development of African football and how African players are increasingly able to

compete at the highest level against the best teams in the world.

In this campaign, African teams have taken points off Brazil, England, Portugal, Spain, Uruguay, and Belgium - all squads with history and pedigree that have struggled to cope with the quality of African teams.

"We need to believe in this objective, this target (to win the World Cup)," said Morocco coach Mohamed Ouahbi.

When Shakira sang "This Time for Africa" sixteen years ago, it was a celebratory anthem for a host nation. In 2026, it reads like a warning to the rest of the footballing world.