



Ivorians out to steal HAALAND’S THUNDER

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Erling Haaland will be the centre of attention in Dallas on Tuesday, but the Ivory Coast will be hoping to highlight some attacking talent of their own when they take on Norway in their World Cup Round of 32 clash.

Norway’s one-man wrecking ball has four goals in his two appearances at the tournament and is set to return after being rested in the last group game against France, as were most of the Norwegian first-choice players.

Haaland scored twice against Iraq in Norway’s return to the World Cup after a 28-year absence and was at his predatory best as they beat Senegal to secure their progress after only two group games.

Ivory Coast’s planning will centre on how to stop Haaland in what is sure to be a thorough examination of the West African team’s defence that has conceded just one goal in the group stage.

But coach Emerse Fae will also be looking to have his side on the front foot and take the game to Norway – and keep Haaland off the ball.

The Ivorians have an exciting array of forward talent, led by teenager Yan Diomande, who is another dominating the club pre-season transfer market speculation, and former Arsenal record signing Nicolas Pepe, who scored twice in their last match against Curacao and is reviving his reputation.

- This will be the first-ever meeting between Norway and Ivory Coast.
- This will be only Norway’s third knockout match at a World Cup. Stale Solbakken’s side have not lost consecutive matches since September 2022, when they were beaten by Slovenia and Serbia in the Nations League.
- Norway have lost only two of their 19 matches against African opposition in all competitions (W9 D8), with both defeats coming in friendlies against Senegal (2006) and South Africa (2009).
- Erling Haaland could become the first player since Hungary’s Sándor Kocsis in 1954 to score in each of his first three World Cup appearances. He already has

- four goals at this tournament.
- Ivory Coast are featuring in the World Cup knockout stage for the first time. The Elephants have also won multiple matches at a single World Cup for the first time and scored the opening goal in all three group-stage games.
- Ivory Coast trailed for just three minutes and 29 seconds during the group stage, all of it coming after Germany’s late winner in their 2-1 defeat to the Group E winners.
- Yan Diomande became only the second African player to complete 10+ dribbles (10) and create 10+ chances (10) in a single World Cup group stage, after South Africa’s Quinton Fortune in 2002.

Broos leaves a lasting legacy with South Africa

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Hugo Broos walked away from Los Angeles Stadium on Sunday with the pain of defeat still fresh, but not with regret. South Africa’s 1-0 loss to Canada in the FIFA World Cup 2026 Round of 32 may have ended Bafana Bafana’s historic run, yet it did little to diminish what the 74-year-old Belgian had achieved.

A stoppage-time strike from Stephen Eustaquio denied South Africa a place in the last 16, but Broos insisted there was more reason for pride than disappointment.

“We can look back on this tournament with happiness,” he said afterwards. “I don’t think anybody expected that before the tournament.”

For Broos, the defeat could also mark the final chapter of a football career spanning more than five decades. The former Belgium international, who appeared at the 1986 World Cup as a player, confirmed this tournament would be his last on football’s biggest stage, though he stopped short of announcing whether he would step away from coaching altogether.

Born in Humbeek in 1952, Broos established himself as one of Belgium’s finest defenders, winning domestic and European honours with Anderlecht before ending his playing days at Club Brugge. He later built an impressive coaching resume, collecting league titles, cup



successes and four Belgian Coach of the Year awards, while guiding Cameroon to Africa Cup of Nations glory in 2017.

When he accepted the South Africa job in 2021, Bafana Bafana were a side struggling for direction, absent from the World Cup since hosting the tournament in 2010. Broos rebuilt the team around a core of largely domestic-based players, demanding discipline, organisation and collective belief.

Those qualities were evident throughout the tournament. After an opening defeat to Mexico in which South Africa had two players sent off, they recovered to draw with Czechia and beat South Korea to reach the knockout stages for the first time in the nation’s history.

Against Canada, however, Broos acknowledged the limitations of his squad. He pointed to a lack of power, pace and speed of execution compared with their opponents, arguing that modern football increasingly rewards physicality alongside technical ability.

Yet the coach refused to let one defeat define the campaign.

“It is sore now because we wanted to win,” Broos said. “But what we did was good. I’m very proud of my team.”

South Africa may be out, but under Hugo Broos they are certainly not down.



Mexico, Ecuador renew rivalry 24 years later

STAR SPORTS DESK

Mexico and Ecuador lock horns for a place in the last 16 in the Azteca Stadium, with the match kicking off at 7:00 am Bangladesh time.

Co-hosts Mexico breezed through Group A, beating Czechia 3-0 after overcoming South Africa and South Korea without conceding a single goal. Their defensive record has been the defining feature of their tournament, giving Javier Aguirre’s side a platform as they prepare for another high-pressure match against Ecuador.

This is the first time since 1986 – when they last hosted the competition – that Mexico have gone without conceding a goal in three consecutive World Cup matches. They have never kept four clean sheets in a row in a single edition.

Their impressive start has added to a strong record in front of their own fans in the World Cup, having lost just one of their 12 matches – a 4-1 loss to Italy in the 1970 quarterfinals.

In the nine previous times Mexico have reached the knockout rounds, they have progressed just once: in a last-16 tie against Bulgaria in 1986 – a match that also took place at the Azteca.

On the other hand, Ecuador made the last 32 the hard way, recovering from a 1-0 loss to Ivory Coast by drawing 0-0 against Curacao before reviving their campaign with a 2-1 comeback win over Germany in Group E.

For Ecuador, managing the atmosphere may be as important as breaking down Mexico’s defence. An early breakthrough would force the hosts into unfamiliar territory at this tournament.

The South American side had featured in the knockout stages of the World Cup only once, and that too ending in 2-1 loss to England in the last 16 in 2006. The two countries have met 25 times, with Mexico winning 14 including a 2-1 victory in their only previous World Cup encounter in 2002.



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It was supposed to be a historic celebration of Asian football. With the World Cup expanded to 48 teams in North America, a record nine nations from the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) arrived with genuine ambitions. Instead, the tournament became a sobering reality check, exposing the vast gulf between Asia’s best and the world’s elite.

Across 27 matches, AFC teams managed just three victories. Only Australia and Japan survived the group stage. For the remaining seven nations, it was a campaign of disappointment, frustration and painful underachievement.

The tournament laid bare an uncomfortable truth. When the stakes were highest, Asia’s finest simply could not cope with the intensity of elite opposition. Five AFC teams – Jordan, Iraq, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia and reigning Asian champions Qatar – finished bottom of their respective groups.

Sides that had impressed on the continental stage suddenly looked overwhelmed against world-class opponents, undone by tactical

confusion, defensive fragility and an inability to match the pace of the game.

THE REASON BEHIND THE FAILURE

At the heart of this collective failure lies a lack of exposure to elite-level competition.

As Jordan’s Moroccan coach Jamal Sellami reflected after the tournament, Asian football remains trapped in something of a domestic echo chamber. Too few of the continent’s best players test themselves week in, week out against the world’s strongest opposition, leaving them ill-equipped for the physical and tactical demands of a World Cup.

Despite the enormous financial investment pouring into leagues across the Gulf and East Asia, many of the region’s leading players remain confined to relatively insular competitions. They operate in environments where the tempo is slower, the physical demands are more familiar and their status as established stars is rarely challenged.

That creates a false sense of security.

A side like Jordan can reach an Asian Cup final by outperforming teams operating at a similar level. The World Cup, however, is an

entirely different examination, where every mistake is punished and every second on the ball is contested.

Modern elite football is built on relentless pressing, athleticism and tactical precision. Opponents close down space with astonishing speed, leaving virtually no time to think or recover. Players accustomed to enjoying an extra second or two in their domestic leagues suddenly found themselves harried into mistakes.

The consequences were devastating. Uzbekistan conceded nine goals across three matches, while Jordan were torn apart by Argentina after repeatedly losing possession in dangerous areas.

More than a question of quality, it exposed a lack of conditioning. These players simply lacked the muscle memory to deal with such relentless physical and mental pressure.

The contrast with Africa only reinforces the point.

African football has long functioned as a pathway to Europe, with many of its brightest talents moving abroad at a young age. By the time they represent their national teams at

a World Cup, they are already accustomed to facing elite attackers, coping with high-intensity pressing and operating within sophisticated tactical systems.

For many Asian internationals, those demands remain unfamiliar until they arrive at football’s biggest stage.

HEADS ROLL IN SEOUL AND RIYADH

South Korea’s so-called golden generation, featuring Son Heung-min, Lee Kang-in and Kim Min-jae, had been widely tipped to reach the knockout stage. Instead, a solitary victory over the Czech Republic was followed by defeats to Mexico and South Africa, sending them crashing out.

The backlash was swift. Head coach Hong Myung-bo, one of the country’s most celebrated football figures, resigned on Sunday amid mounting criticism from supporters and growing political pressure. In a symbolic reflection of the public mood, there will be no official welcome ceremony when the squad returns to Incheon Airport.

Saudi Arabia endured an equally humiliating campaign.

- Despite a record-breaking nine nations from the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) qualifying for the newly expanded 48-team World Cup, a catastrophic group stage saw only two teams survive to qualify for the knockout rounds.
- Trap-lined by a slower domestic tempo, Asian players froze under elite global pressing, winning just three of 27 matches, triggering immense frustration and the immediate resignations of South Korea’s head coach and Saudi Arabia’s football president.
- While five major Asian teams finished dead last in their groups, Africa enjoyed a historic tournament, sending an astonishing nine out of ten teams into the round of 32.

Having invested almost two billion dollars in transforming its domestic league and attracting global stars such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar, the kingdom’s national team finished bottom of Group H with just two points. Following a crushing 4-0 defeat by Spain, Saudi Arabian Football Federation president Yasser al-Misehal announced his resignation, underlining the scale of the failure.