



Friday, November 18, 2022  
Rabia II 24, 1444 AH

# GULF TIMES SPORT

FIFA WORLD CUP  
Qatar 2022

2  
days to go



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We are fired up for this World Cup, says Germany's Gnabry

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QATAR 2022

# Giroud hungry for goals and second title with France

Former Arsenal and Chelsea forward, who has 114 caps, is now just two goals away from equalling Henry's record haul of 51 for France

By Sahar Bidappa  
Doha

At 36, Olivier Giroud is in the twilight of his career yet the veteran striker has shown no signs of slowing down. The France star will be playing in his third World Cup for the defending champions at Qatar 2022 and could be the key man for Les Bleus, who have been blighted by injuries in the run up to the tournament.

For Giroud, this year's World Cup will certainly be his last dance at a major tournament. But with a key milestone in sight and his poor record at previous World Cups, Giroud is motivated to perform well.

Giroud was not even in coach Didier Deschamps' scheme of things until March this year, when he earned a recall after a nine-month hiatus following France's Euro 2020 early exit.

Since then, the striker has hit nine goals this season for Serie A champions AC Milan and also became France's oldest international goalscorer in September when he netted for the 49th time for his country in a UEFA Nations League game against Austria.

The former Arsenal and Chelsea forward, who has 114 caps, is now just two goals away from equalling great Thierry Henry's record haul of 51 for France. Speaking at a press conference at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium ahead of France's first training session yesterday, Giroud admitted that the record was in his mind but wanted to focus on helping France to clinch a second successive world title. "For me it is kind of a blessing to have the opportunity to play for my country at a third World Cup," said Giroud.

"I want to enjoy every single moment. Of course I have this



France's Karim Benzema (left) speaks with Kylian Mbappe (right) and Marcus Thuram during a training session at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

target in my head to beat 'Titi' (Henry) but the main one is as a team, to go as far as we can in the competition and if I get the chance to go closer to him (Henry). To win one World Cup is obviously such a big childhood dream. To get a second one would be amazing. As a competitor I have no limits. I am still hungry. I want to play as far as my body allows me with my advanced age. I am closer to the end of my career than to the beginning. The determination and mental motivation is everything in sport so that's why I am never satisfied. I want to do more and

more," he added.

France open their campaign against Australia at the Al Janoub Stadium in Al Wakrah next Tuesday, November 22. While Giroud was expected to feature mainly from the bench, he could well make it to the starting XI as Real Madrid star Karim Benzema has not recovered fully from a muscular injury.

Yesterday, both Benzema and defender Raphael Varane – who is nursing a thigh injury – did not take part in the training session. "The coach knows what my role will be, as soon as I'm needed, I'll be there," Giroud said.

The striker knows he needs to do much more than what he has done in previous World Cups – with his sole strike at the sport's biggest stage coming in Brazil in 2014. "Yes, I scored one in 2014 (World Cup) and a few at the 2016 Euros. It's important for the team to score. I'll give it my 200% for the team. For me it's kind of a blessing to have the opportunity to play for my country in a third World Cup," he said.

Giroud was asked if he was in the form of his life after his recent acrobatic finishes drew comparisons with Zlatan Ib-

rahimovic at his peak. The Frenchman, who won the FIFA Puskas Award for goal of the year in 2017 for his spectacular scorpion-kick goal for Arsenal against Crystal Palace, said he was in a 'good spell' and liked scoring 'acrobatic goals'.

"I don't know if I am in my best form and if you look at some of the goals I have scored in the past I have already got some that have been a bit like Zlatan. I do like scoring acrobatic goals. But it is true that I am in a good spell. I feel good physically, I am happy with my game and at my club. At the age of 36 it is a gift to be able to be so important and to feel so good, and I hope to keep this going," he said.

The France squad has been hit hard by injuries, with important midfielders Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kante ruled out of the tournament in Qatar a month ahead. On Wednesday, RB Leipzig forward Christopher Nkunku too had to pull out after suffering a knee injury with Eintracht Frankfurt striker Randal Kolo Muani replacing him.

Giroud said injuries were part of football and hoped the young players would rise to the occasion if given a chance. "There is always some exposure to injuries but you must not think about that and just train normally. I'm sure there are other young players who will emerge and perform their roles well. We don't announce ourselves as favourites but I have a lot of faith in this squad," he said.

Giroud said France, who also take on Denmark and Tunisia in Group D, will face a tough opening match against Australia on Tuesday. "We haven't really studied them closely yet but we know they're quality players, with many of them playing in Europe. It will be a tough match," he noted.



France's forward Olivier Giroud trains at the Jassim Bin Hamad Stadium yesterday. (AFP)

SPOTLIGHT

# Atmosphere in Qatar camp is wonderful, says Hassan

By Sahar Bidappa  
Doha

Defender Abdelkarim Hassan says there is a sense of excitement in the Qatar camp as they await eagerly to make their historic World Cup debut. The hosts kick off the World Cup against Ecuador at the Al Bayt Stadium on Sunday, with Hassan and his teammates set to realise their childhood dreams.

"Everyone is excited and the atmosphere in the team is wonderful," said Hassan, as the Qatar squad continued training at the Aspire training pitch yesterday. "We are eagerly waiting for the referee's kick off whistle for the Ecuador match. Every member of the squad is looking forward to contributing and playing his role for the team. We are targeting a good performance in front of our home fans," he added.

Ever since joining the Aspire



Abdelkarim Hassan

Academy at 13 years old, Hassan and many of his teammates have dreamt playing at the World Cup. The 29-year-old – a pivotal player in Qatar's maiden Asian Cup triumph in 2019 – said the team is well prepared and ready to put their best foot forward. "It's a dream of every player

to play the World Cup for his country. Like everyone it was my childhood dream too and I am proud to be a part of Qatar squad in our historic participation. I am looking forward to doing a lot at this World Cup, help my team achieve its goals," Hassan said. "Our training camps were

highly beneficial. The friendly games during these camps gave us good match practice as well. The technical staff deserves the praise as they worked very hard to prepare us for the tournament," he added.

Voted Asia's Best Player in 2018, Hassan will be key to Qatar's hopes of making it to the knockout stage as the left-back can also chip in with crucial goals. The Al Sadd Star – known as 'Kimo' to friends and teammates – is aware though it won't be easy against Group A opponents the Netherlands, Senegal and Ecuador.

"Without any doubt, the task is not easy. It's a World Cup and all the teams are coming well prepared, so we need to double our effort. We are hoping for a performance like that in Asian Cup and bring smiles on the faces of our fans at the World Cup," said Hassan, who has appeared 130 times for Qatar and scored 15 goals.



Qatar's defender Bassam al-Rawi (centre) heads the ball during a training session at the Aspire Training Pitch in Doha yesterday, ahead of the hosts World Cup match against Ecuador. (AFP)

FOOTBALL

# Ronaldo was close to joining rivals Manchester City

A banner of Ronaldo has already been removed from the facade of Old Trafford

Reuters  
Manchester

Manchester United forward Cristiano Ronaldo said he was close to signing for bitter rivals Manchester City last year but former manager Alex Ferguson asked him not to.

Ronaldo said Ferguson persuaded him to re-join United for a second spell at Old Trafford when he moved from Juventus in August, 2021 on a two-year deal, returning to the club where he won eight major trophies from 2003-2009.

"Well, honestly, it was close... It's something they spoke (about) a lot and (Manchester City manager Pep) Guardiola said two weeks ago, I guess, that they tried hard to have me," Ronaldo told Piers Morgan in an interview for *TalkTV*, the first part of which was aired on Wednesday.

"But as you know, as my history (was) in Manchester United, your heart, your feeling... make the difference. And of course, as well, Sir Alex Ferguson.

"I was surprised... But it was a conscious decision. Because the heart speaks, speaking loud in that moment."

He added that Ferguson's intervention helped him make up his mind to join United.

"I think it was the key. It was the difference in that moment, but I cannot be loyal if I will, I wouldn't say that Manchester City wasn't close," Ronaldo said.

"I spoke with him (Ferguson)... He said to me that, 'It's impossible for you to come to Manchester City'.

"And I say, 'OK, Boss! So I took the decisions and..."

"It was a good decision."

In an excerpt of the interview published on Sunday, Ronaldo said that United had betrayed him and alleged he was being forced out of the club.

The Portugal forward also said United did not support him when his daughter was taken to hospital in July, doubting him and showing a lack of empathy when he did not arrive on time for pre-season training.



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo during training at Cidade do Futebol, Oeiras, Portugal, on November 14, 2022. (Reuters)

## NO WAY BACK FOR RONALDO AT MAN UTD, SAYS NEVILLE

Ronaldo's contract at Manchester United should be terminated by the club, said former United captain Gary Neville.

"I don't think he wants a way back," Neville told *Sky Sports*. "He wouldn't have done this interview if he wanted a way back. He knew it would bring the headlines it has and be the end of his Manchester United career."

Ronaldo has just over six months left on his contract after rejoining United from Juventus in August 2021. The Portuguese won three Premier League titles and the Champions League during his first stint at Old Trafford.

United failed to qualify for the Champions League after finishing sixth in the Premier League last season, despite Ronaldo's 24 goals in all competitions.

"I'm wondering what Man United are doing because the reality of it is they know they have to terminate Cristiano's

contract or they basically open up a precedent so any player can criticise them in the future," added Neville.

"I agree with some of the things Cristiano has said, and many Man United fans will agree with many things Cristiano has said."

"But the reality is if you're an employee within a business and say those things your employment has to terminate and Man United have to do that in the next few days."

A banner of Ronaldo has already been removed from the facade of Old Trafford.

## AUSTRALIA OFFER 'LOVE AND RESPECT' TO WOO RONALDO

A-League boss Danny Townsend has made a bid to lure Ronaldo to the Australian top flight, while admitting it might not be able to compete financially with rival offers for the disaffected Manchester United star.

Townsend told Australian media yes-

terday that he had made an offer to Ronaldo's agent, Jorge Mendes, in case Ronaldo parts ways with United.

"(Ronaldo) said he wasn't getting any love and respect at Manchester United but we'll certainly give him plenty of love and respect in Australia," Townsend said in comments published by News Corp.

"We might not be able to compete financially with other offers but we can compete in other ways."

Ronaldo's former United teammate Nani joined A-League club Melbourne Victory this season.

Ronaldo, the leading scorer in the history of men's international football with 117 goals in 191 official matches, is preparing to lead Portugal in Qatar in his fifth World Cup.

"Obviously it's a long shot but we've certainly got a compelling proposition for him here in Australia to consider," Townsend told local radio station Sports-FM earlier yesterday.

SPOTLIGHT

# Brazil are favourites to win the World Cup: Ronald de Boer

Ronald de Boer is predicting Brazil will win the FIFA World Cup for a record sixth time at this year's tournament in Qatar.

The former Netherlands international recently gave his World Cup predictions to the Supreme Committee for Delivery & Legacy.

He is predicting the South American giants will beat Portugal in the final at Lusail Stadium on 18 December.

The former Ajax, Barcelona and Rangers midfielder is also tipping his country to have a strong campaign by claiming third place.

He sees Louis van Gaal's side winning Group A, ahead of Africa Cup of Nations holders, Senegal.

"As a Dutch guy, I was quite pleased with the draw, and I think the team can be happy with this group as well," said de Boer.

"To be in the same group with hosts Qatar is special for me after living in Doha for seven years - but for me, the Netherlands and Senegal are the favourites to advance."

The 52-year-old, who appeared for the Oranje at two World Cups, expects a surprise in Group F, with Croatia and Morocco finishing ahead of one of the favourites, Belgium, and Canada.

"You always have a surprise somewhere in a World Cup," he said. "For me, I think Belgium are going to struggle, with Morocco



being the surprise team in the group." De Boer's knockout predictions include some enticing clashes from the quarter-finals stage onwards, with the Netherlands reaching the last four before falling to Brazil, while France will see their World Cup title defence come to an end against Portugal.

The Qatar Legacy Ambassador then expects the Brazilians to lift the trophy by overcoming Cristiano Ronaldo and co on Qatar National Day.

"For me, Brazil are the clear favourites to win the title," de Boer said. "When Brazilian players put that yellow jersey on, something happens to their mindset. I believe Brazil will be fully ready for this World Cup, and come the final day, I think they will lift the trophy again."

Fans interested in attending Qatar 2022 should click here for the latest tickets, accommodation and Hayya information.

FOCUS

# Senegal's Mane ruled out of the World Cup

Reuters  
Doha

Senegal forward Sadio Mane has been ruled out of the World Cup in Qatar in a crushing blow to his team's chances, officials said yesterday.

Mane had been a doubt for the tournament after picking up a leg injury playing for his German club Bayern Munich last week, and it has now been confirmed he will not recover in time.

Senegal Football Federation officials announced that further

scans had revealed he will require surgery.

Mane is the talisman of the Senegal side and a key player for them in attack.

His absence will be a blow to their chances of advancing out of Group A, where they face the Netherlands on Monday before playing host nation Qatar and Ecuador.



## beIN SPORTS reveals game-changing coverage plans for FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022

Doha: beIN MEDIA GROUP ("beIN"), and its flagship sports channels beIN SPORTS, has revealed its extensive and unrivalled coverage plans for the upcoming FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). With more than 20 state-of-the-art studios positioned around the country, 18 hours of daily live coverage across each of its eight channels in four languages and the biggest male and female names in football providing the best analysis around, no other broadcaster will cover the beautiful game's quadrennial tournament like beIN. As the official FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 broadcaster in 25 countries across MENA and France, beIN will play a central role in showcasing Qatar and its historic tournament to the world,



leading the way throughout build-up and during the biggest sporting event on the planet, which kicks off on November 20 and runs until December 18. With its Qatar headquarters having evolved into one of the world's leading sports and entertainment broadcasters over the past 19 years, beIN understands better than anyone the signifi-

cance of providing exclusive, in depth, and quadrilingual coverage of the region's first FIFA World Cup to local audiences across Qatar and the wider Arab World. Mohamed al-Bader, Managing Director of beIN Channels - MENA, said: "It is more than a decade since Qatar made history in being awarded hosting rights for

the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. In that time, like the country itself, we at beIN have worked tirelessly to ensure we provide an experience like never before seen anywhere in the world. We are offering an unrivalled viewing experience to football fans across the region. Nobody understands Qatar like beIN. Nobody has lived this journey like beIN. And nobody has the unique access and presence we do. On our home turf, our product will be best-in-class. "With more than 20 state-of-the-art studios around the country, six brand new channels, extensive original coverage in four languages in HD and 4K, and with world-class pundits and reporters literally everywhere - from stadiums to fan zones, hotels to training camps - there is only once place to watch the



greatest show on Earth, and that is undoubtedly on beIN SPORTS." The broadcaster has launched a bouquet of six new high-definition beIN SPORTS MAX channels dedicated to FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 coverage. Broadcasting 24 hours daily, the channels are divided along language preferences, with two Arabic, two English and two

French channels, with the brand-new additional option of Spanish commentary on the two English channels during live matches. beIN's very own Spanish commentators have been especially selected from Spain's La Liga to call all the action on every game. Each new channel will feature full-day programming including live and exclusive coverage of

all 64 games, a daily morning and evening show, original team-specific documentaries, unique previews, reviews, studio analysis from inside the stadiums and around the host country, and live, on-the-ground reporting across the region and worldwide. Every game will also be shown live in ultra-HD on beIN 4K with English and Arabic commentary. The Arabic language MAX Channels, beIN SPORTS MAX 1 and 2, will be continuously live from 09:00 (Makkah) until 02:00 (Makkah) the following day throughout the tournament. The live coverage gets underway with the three-hour morning show (Here is Qatar) which will review the previous night's action, cover breaking tournament stories as they develop and look forward to the day's live action.

MOTORSPORT

# Toyota Gazoo Racing celebrates 2022 World Endurance Championship win

Toyota celebrated a spectacular finish to the 2022 World Endurance Championship (WEC) season recently with a one-two victory at 8 Hours of Bahrain that saw the Toyota Gazoo Racing team achieve a clean sweep of this year's FIA WEC titles. Mike Conway, Kamui Kobayashi and José María López claimed their second win of the season in the No. 7 GR010 Hybrid Electric Hypercar, enabling Toyota to be crowned as Hypercar Manufacturers' World Champions.

Teammates Sébastien Buemi, Brendon Hartley and Ryo Hiramawa finished second to become Drivers' World Champions, adding to their 2022 24 Hours of Le Mans win. Buemi and Hartley write their names in the record books as the first drivers to win three titles in the top WEC category and

its predecessor, the World Sportscar Championship. Hiramawa also capped a remarkable rookie season by becoming Japan's third WEC champion.

A perfect result in Bahrain was a fitting end to a highly successful season for Toyota Gazoo Racing, which now has a fifth world title double from 10 years of WEC competition, adding to achievements in 2022 that include a fifth-consecutive Le Mans win and eighth victory at Fuji Speedway. Success in the WEC ensured the team won every available title in the three FIA series it participated in this season; the World Endurance, World Rally, and World Rally Raid Championships.

The race began under bright sunshine, with air temperatures of 35°C and equally hot on-track action. Buemi led from pole position in the No. 7



GR010 Hybrid Electric Hypercar, while López began the race in third place in the No. 8 GR010 Hybrid Electric Hypercar. Just six seconds separated the

top three cars when the opening pit stops arrived, during which López leaptfrogged into second place.

After two hours, both GR010 Hybrid

Electric Hypercars swapped drivers with Hartley taking over the No. 8 and Conway getting behind the wheel of the No. 7.

The two Hypercars battled throughout this period of the race, separated by less than a second until Conway took the lead early in the fourth hour as the sun set over Bahrain International Circuit. He continued to push hard to build a gap and at half distance led by a few seconds going into the next pit stops, when Kobayashi took the wheel. Kobayashi gradually extended the No. 7 GR010 Hybrid Electric Hypercar's advantage to 15 seconds by the end of the fifth hour, before López and Buemi returned to their respective cockpits with less than two hours remaining.

Further driver changes with 45 minutes to go left Conway to take the cheq-

uered flag in the No. 7 GR010 Hybrid Electric Hypercar, finishing 45.471 secs clear of Hartley in the No. 8 GR010 Hybrid Electric Hypercar. This triggered title celebrations to bring the curtain down on an exciting Hypercar season.

Akio Toyoda, President of Toyota Motor Corporation and TGR Team Founder, commented: "On the weekend that we had two world championship events for Toyota Gazoo Racing, there are so many things I would like to say. First of all, we were able to achieve five World Championship titles so it was a great season for us. Seb, Brendon, Ryo, and the whole No. 8 team, congratulations on the title! Kamui, Mike, José, and the No. 7 team, congratulations on your win in the final round. Thank you so much also to our fans and partners who have been supporting us!"

QATAR 2022

# We're fired up for World Cup, says Germany star Gnabry

After missing Russia 2018 through injury, Serge Gnabry is on the cusp of making his debut on the biggest stage of all in Qatar

At the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia, Serge Gnabry's only involvement for Germany was to cheer the team on from home in front of the television after injury had deprived him of a chance to play on the biggest stage.

Four years on, at 27, the Bayern Munich forward is finally preparing for his World Cup debut and in this interview with FIFA, he shares his thoughts on coach Hansi Flick, the team's evolution in style under him, and Germany's opponents in Group E.

**How would you describe Germany's path through qualifying?**

It went perfectly. Obviously the opponents probably aren't the ones you'll face in decisive games at the World Cup, but it's still not easy to win the games we managed to win in qualifying. The fact that big nations sometimes fail to qualify underlines that fact. But we're always there.

**You know Germany coach Hansi Flick well from your time together at Bayern. What is your relationship with him like?**

We've got a good and close relationship. I know him from Bayern but I also knew him from the Germany set-up because he was involved with the youth teams. So we've known each other for a while now and he always gets on well with the players. That personal connection is one of his strengths and it's extremely helpful for a coach when



Germany's Joshua Kimmich and Serge Gnabry (right) before their friendly against Oman in Muscat on Wednesday. (Reuters)

you have a good rapport with your players.

**What is he like on and off the pitch?**

It's a perfect combination of being laid-back, having fun and working seriously. You can make a couple of jokes but then you need to go back to being fully focused. He wants you to be at

100 per cent both in training and in matches, and he pays a lot of attention to the details. He's also relaxed off the pitch, so it's really enjoyable.

**What is the difference between his previous style of play and his current one? Is there a difference?**

There are always some minor

adjustments of course but overall, the way we play is very similar. We had a lot of success with his style at Bayern and it's getting better in the national team too. Things might be slightly different here and there, but it's similar to how it was at Bayern.

**Are there any differences to the way you played under**

**Joachim Low?**

Yes, it's a little bit different. We focus more on pressing and getting forward more aggressively. I'd say those are the things that are a little different under Hansi Flick. Previously, it was more about having possession, having a composed build-up and keeping control.

How much of an advantage is

it that you already know so many players in the squad?

It's always an advantage. There are a lot of players from Bayern who I get on well with - we're very familiar with each other.

The same group of players have been involved with the national team over the last few years, with a few exceptions, so you build a bond. We always have a good time and it's fun because we know each other well as a team because of all the games we've played together.

**What is the atmosphere like in the squad? Is it different compared to the EURO last year?**

The sense of anticipation is the same. We set ourselves high objectives as the German national team and we want to do well. So I don't think there are many differences. We're looking forward to playing again after things didn't go so well for us at the European Championship. That's why I think we're a bit more fired up for the World Cup, if you can put it like that.

**How would you describe Germany's group with Spain, Japan and Costa Rica?**

We know that our last game against Spain wasn't very good [a 6-0 defeat in the UEFA Nations League in 2020]. I wouldn't underestimate Japan.

They've got a lot of players who play at the highest level, for example in the Bundesliga or in the Premier League. I'm looking

forward to that game. Costa Rica are maybe the underdogs but at a tournament everyone gives their all. We need to approach every game with the same respect and motivation and perform to the best of our ability.

**How do you view the fixture against Spain?**

It will be a meeting of two giants of the world game.

We want to win. I think it will be decisive in terms of winning the group or finishing in the top two. We have to win the match and we want to win it. We still have the memory of our last defeat so we want to make amends for that.

**Are you looking forward to making your World Cup debut?**

Yes, I'm very excited to be playing at my first World Cup at the age of 27. Unfortunately it's taken a while but I'm looking forward to the tournament and I hope we'll be successful.

**What are your expectations for the Germany team in Qatar?**

A successful tournament. We have big plans. As I said earlier, the European Championship didn't go very well for us, so we want to make up for it at the World Cup.

We've got the quality and we've recovered from that difficult tournament. That's why we're going to Qatar with confidence and the clear aim of being successful.

FOCUS

## Fati shines as Spain beat Jordan in warm-up tie



Spain's Ansu Fati (right) celebrates scoring during the friendly match against Jordan at the Hussein Youth City Stadium in Amman yesterday. (AFP)

AFP Amman

Ansu Fati scored his first Spain goal for over two years as Luis Enrique's side beat Jordan 3-1 yesterday in a World Cup warm-up friendly in Amman.

The Barcelona forward, 20, has suffered from injury problems for most of that time but immediately repaid his coach's decision to include him with a convincing display.

Fati and Marco Asensio, two of the players whose inclusion in the World Cup squad was questioned in some quarters, combined for the opener in the 13th minute.

Real Madrid forward Asensio drove forward and fed Fati, who fired home from inside the area,

for his second Spain goal in five appearances.

Another Barcelona youngster, Gavi, doubled dominant Spain's lead early in the second half with a cool finish, stroking home when the ball broke to him in the box.

Substitute Nico Williams fired a third home late on for his first international goal on his third appearance for La Roja.

Jordan pulled a goal back to delight their fans in stoppage time, with Hamza al-Daradreh beating Cesar Azpilicueta to score.

Spain appeared to avoid any further injury issues in the match, after left-back Jose Gaya suffered an ankle sprain in training on Wednesday night, although it is not believed to be serious.

Luis Enrique's side, who ar-

rived in Qatar in the early hours of Friday morning, face Costa Rica in their first Group E game on November 23, before playing Germany and Japan.

**Late penalty gives Canada win over Japan**

Lucas Cavallini scored an injury-time penalty to give Canada a 2-1 friendly victory over Japan in Dubai yesterday before both teams headed to Qatar for the World Cup.

Japan goalkeeper Shuchi Gonda dived early and still had enough time to get back up and lay a glove on Cavallini's floated spot kick, but could not keep it out.

The Vancouver Whitecaps striker had been handed the chance to send Canada into their first World Cup in 36 years on a high when the referee pointed

to the spot after Miki Yamane fouled Richie Laryea in the 93rd minute.

Japan opened the scoring in the ninth minute when Yuki Soma jumped to poke home a lofted ball into the box by Gaku Shibasaki.

Canada equalised 12 minutes later when Steven Vitoria turned the ball into the Japanese net after Atiba Hutchinson had connected with Junior Hoilett's corner.

Canada are appearing in their first World Cup since 1986 and will face Belgium, Canada and Morocco in Group F in Qatar.

They play Belgium in their opening game on November 23.

Japan have been drawn in Group E with Germany, Spain and Costa Rica, and open their campaign against the Germans on November 23.

SPOTLIGHT

## Australia's Rowles ready to take on Mbappe and Benzema

Reuters Doha

Socceroos centre half Kye Rowles has declared himself fit to take on French strike duo Kylian Mbappe and Karim Benzema in Australia's World Cup opener on Tuesday despite his recent foot injury. Rowles broke a bone in his foot at the end of August playing for Hearts in the Scottish Premier League but thinks he is now ready to shut down what many believe is the strongest strike partnership at the tournament.

"Obviously, it's not been the perfect run in for myself," he told reporters at Australia's

training camp yesterday.

"But I know that once I put my head down and get out there that the fitness level is kind of - I'm not focused on that. I'm just focused on doing my job for the team.

"And obviously, once you get into the game and you've got the likes of Benzema and Mbappe around you, you don't have time to think about how you're feeling and stuff like that. You just have to do your job and make sure they're nullified as best as possible. I mean, I'm feeling strong anyway, and very fit."

Rowles conceded that there were times when he thought he might not have made enough progress after his injury for

coach Graham Arnold to include him the squad for his first World Cup.

"Yeah, pretty much, like the whole time," he said. "I had to come back super-fast and there's always the risk of pushing the limit a bit too much and I didn't really have time for even a tiny little setback where it's three or four days.

"Hats off to everyone involved for getting me back to a playing level. And now that I'm fit and ready, I'm just getting fitter and stronger every day and sharper as well. Yeah, come next Tuesday, I'll be ready."

Australia also play Denmark and Tunisia in Group D in their fifth successive visit to the World Cup finals.



Australia's Kye Rowles during a press conference at the Aspire Zone yesterday. (Reuters)

**Infantino to serve another four-year term as FIFA President**

Zurich: FIFA President Gianni Infantino will stand unopposed for a third term as head of world football's governing body next year, FIFA confirmed yesterday. A brief statement from FIFA said that Infantino would be the only candidate when the election takes place at the 73rd FIFA Congress in Kigali, Rwanda, on March 16.

"No other candidature has been submitted," the statement said yesterday.

Infantino's third term follows in the line of previous FIFA presidents - Joao Havelange was in charge from 1974 to 1998 and Infantino's predecessor Sepp Blatter held office from 1998 to 2015.

Infantino was elected in 2016 promising to "restore FIFA's image" after the federation was plagued by scandal in the final years of Blatter's time in charge. The German Football Federation (DFB) said

on Wednesday it would not support Infantino's re-election.

Infantino can point to the growth in FIFA's turnover during his time in charge - the governing body is forecasting turnover of \$7bn for the four-year cycle till 2022.

But many of his proposals for the reform of club football, including a plan to expand the Club World Cup to 24 teams, have received a lukewarm reception.

## SPOTLIGHT

# Indian drums, Argentina fans greet Messi's arrival

AFP  
Doha

Indian drums drowned out Argentina's diehard fans as hundreds waited hours to get a glimpse of a bus carrying Lionel Messi outside his World Cup team base in Qatar.

The drummers and Indian beat dancers again showed how Qatar 2022 is going to be a different experience for players and visiting fans. Supporters from the subcontinent had outnumbered England fans when they greeted Harry Kane's side on Tuesday.

A crowd of more than 500 that had waited until nearly 4:00am (0100GMT) to see the arrival of their heroes was split evenly between Argentina's Indian fans and those from the South American country, many of whom have spent thousands of dollars to get to the World Cup.

The team flew in early yesterday from Abu Dhabi, where they beat United Arab Emirates 5-0 in their final World Cup warm-up on Wednesday night with Messi, 35, scoring his 91st international goal. One of the favourites going into this year's World Cup, the South Americans will begin their campaign on Tuesday against Saudi Arabia in Group C, which also includes Mexico and Poland.

Members of the Argentina Fans In Qatar club, who claim more than 5,000 members, brought drums decorated with "Leo" Messi's portrait to the team base at Qatar University.

"If this is going to be Leo's last World Cup there can be no better place for it," said Munish Sharma who recalled seeing Messi score the winning goal when Argentina beat Brazil 1-0 in a friendly match in Doha in 2010.

Indian fans have already made their mark with thousands taking part in a march and wearing the jerseys from top football na-

tions, including Argentina, Brazil and England.

"They do make a lot of noise," said Laura Valero who arrived from Buenos Aires on Tuesday. "If those drums are going to play here every night then the team will never get to sleep," she said.

### 'WE WANTED TO SEE LEO'

Valero, 24, said she had also borrowed nearly \$8,000 from her parents to make the World Cup trip to Qatar and that was also a concern.

"All my friends are here so I could not say no," she declared.

The two groups of fans battled to see who could make the most noise. Silvia Perla, a 68-year-old Argentine from Catamarca, had her picture taken with Hakeem Salih and others from among the Indians.

"I tried to teach them what we were singing and they tried to teach me some words," she said.

The wait into the night became interminable for some

who left before the Argentina bus sped past about 100m from where Messi's adoring fans were kept behind a wire fence.

"We wanted to see Leo, it's a shame," said Diego Cordovez, whose voice was hoarse from hours of singing.

"But he needs rest, that's more important," he added.

Messi, 35, won a Copa America title last year but the Qatar tournament is probably his last chance to equal Argentine great Diego Maradona in leading his country to World Cup glory.

The 1978 and 1986 World Cup winners extended their unbeaten run to 36 matches against the UAE. Messi has been cautious about the team's chances in Qatar. "We have a very nice group that is very eager, but we think about going little by little. We know that World Cup groups are not easy," the seven-time Ballon d'Or winner said in an interview with CONMEBOL, the South American football federation.



Argentina's Lionel Messi arrives in Doha for the World Cup with other teammates yesterday. (Reuters)

## QATAR 2022

# Upbeat Wales won't be bogged down by long World Cup wait

'We are all excited ahead of the World Cup. Everyone is fit and ready to go'



Wales' defender Ethan Ampadu (centre) chats with teammates during a training session at the Al Sadd Stadium in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

By Rizwan Rehmat  
Doha

The last time Wales appeared in a FIFA World Cup, a young Pele was about to lead Brazil to a title win way back in 1958.

When Wales take on the US at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium on Monday, the team captained by Gareth Bale will end a 64-year-old wait to appear in the World Cup once again.

Despite the long wait, young defender Ethan Ampadu doesn't seem to be too bothered by Wales' lack of World Cup appearances in more than six decades.

"We have settled well (in Qatar) since arriving. We are all excited ahead of the World Cup. Everyone is fit and ready to go. There's a good spirit in the camp and everybody is relaxed," Ampadu, 22, said yesterday at a press conference.

"I am not sure if it's more of a responsibility (of doing well on World Cup return). I think it is what it is. It is the World Cup. We are here to do the best we can and to show how good we are," he said confidently.

"We're here to compete and try to win every game. We are here to do the best that we can and if that gives us a possibility to

win it, then of course, we're going to back ourselves," Ampadu, who plays for Serie A side Spezia on loan from Chelsea, added.

Ampadu said Wales - coached by Rob Page - won't be taking the US - captained by talismanic Christian Pulisic - lightly when the two sides open their Group B campaign on Monday.

"It's going to be a difficult game, of course. We are here for the World Cup. I suppose that's how it's going to be no matter who the opposition is. They have great players. We should try to get past them. We have to show what we can do," Ampadu said.

"I think no matter what team you play, you have to go with that mindset that it's the World Cup. No team is here to draw or lose," he said.

When asked about the warm weather that greeted Wales and other teams in Qatar, Ampadu dismissed it as a concern.

"Well, it's going to be warm for everyone (and not just us). That's what I am going to say about it. Not sure if they (Wales group rivals) are used to the heat or not, better ask them. What matters to us is how well we do here. We can't change that," Ampadu said.

Wales forward Mark Harris, however, said his teammates would make the most of the coming three days before opening



Wales' Gareth Bale gestures during a training session yesterday. (AFP)

their World Cup campaign against the US. "Hopefully it will be cooler in the evening."

"It was warm when we were walking during the day. We are not used to heat like this. I won't say any team has an advantage over the other rivals. I am sure the training in the next few days will help us acclimatise better," Harris said yesterday.

Harris, the Cardiff City star, his team

would be aiming 'for three points' against the US. "They got some quality players. They are a good side. They also have qualified for the World Cup. Their captain Pulisic is a great player. For sure it will be a tough match but we will be playing for three points," Harris, 23, added.

Harris said playing in the World Cup would highlight Wales' potential on the big stage.

"Wales playing in a World Cup has taken 64 years. We have got to two Euro Championships recently but this is the world's biggest stage. We clearly want to win but we will see how far we can go," Harris said.

"We arrive for every match to win. Our main focus right now is the US. The next three days of training will be all about taking on the US," he added.

Harris said he found staying in Qatar enjoyable.

"The hotels are great. We have our own little room for games and other activities. The hotel has everything we need. There are recovery rooms, the gyms. So far so good," he said before leaving the press conference for his team's training session at Al Sadd pitch 2.

Wales face Iran on November 25 and wrap up the group stage with a clash against England on November 29.

## Germany arrive in Doha



Members of the German team including midfielder Jamal Musiala (left) disembark the airplane after arriving at the Hamad International Airport in Doha, yesterday. Germany were the most prominent team to touch down in Doha yesterday, fresh from a 1-0 friendly victory over Oman on Wednesday. The 2014 champions are aiming to erase the memory of their ill-fated campaign in Russia four years ago, when they crashed out of the World Cup in the group stage. Unlike most of the 32 teams at the tournament who have opted to be based in and around Doha, Germany have opted to be based far from the Qatari capital.

## FOCUS

## Ecuador can handle pressure of playing hosts Qatar first: Mena

Reuters  
Doha

Ecuador will have to overcome some opening-night nerves when they play hosts Qatar in the first match of the World Cup on Sunday, but forward Angel Mena is confident they can handle the pressure of the occasion.

Ecuador finished fourth in South American qualifying behind Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay to reach the World Cup finals for only the fourth time after missing out on Russia 2018 and Mena backed the team to give their best in Qatar.

"One of the keys will be the conviction we have to face this match," Mena, whose side also take on the Netherlands and Senegal in Group A, told reporters. "We shouldn't change anything that we have shown during the qualifiers, we've become a solid team offensively. We're focused on doing our best, we can handle the demands of this type of match. We're obviously anxious because it's the first game, but we're aware of what we are playing for."

Midfielder Carlos Gruezo



said Qatar were likely to feel more pressure in front of their home fans. "We need to do things well and not think so much about them," he added.

Ecuador's forwards have failed to fire in recent warm-up games, with the team scoring only two goals in six matches, but Mena said that had not dented their confidence. "It's obvious we haven't scored goals in the last few games, but we have a lot of optimism and confidence in the players who are here," the 34-year-old added.

"We're convinced that it will be a great World Cup and that everyone will fulfil their expectations... We're very convinced there are going to be a lot of goals."