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FIFA WORLD CUP  
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MatchReport

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# Valencia shines as Ecuador beat Qatar in opening clash



Hosts Qatar make their FIFA World Cup debut in front of 67,372 fans at Al Bayt Stadium

By Sahan Bidappa  
Doha

It was always going to be a tall order for Qatar but the manner in which they crumbled against Ecuador would have disappointed the home fans, who were among the 67,372 in attendance at the Al Bayt Stadium for the FIFA World Cup opener yesterday. The 0-2 defeat to Ecuador was a respectable score for Qatar, who looked second best throughout the match against the South Americans. Ecuador – 44th in the FIFA rankings – are only six places above Qatar, but last night

they showed they are miles ahead of the Asian Champions. This was supposed to be Qatar's easiest fixture in Group A, where they also face the Netherlands and Senegal, but Ecuador were too hot to handle for the World Cup debutants. Ecuador captain Enner Valencia should have had a hat-trick on the night. His header in the third minute was ruled out for the tightest of offside by VAR, but the 33-year-old striker was not to be denied in the 16th minute and again found the net in the 31st minute to silence the partisan crowd. As the Qatar players failed to

impose themselves on the game, coach Felix Sanchez stared at the roof of the tent-shaped architecture marvel Al Bayt Stadium, wondering what he or his players could have done differently on the night. In reality, not much. "Our nerves betrayed us, we started really badly," admitted a visibly disappointed Sanchez after the game. "We were unable to string together four passes in a row. Also many defensive gaps. The team was not balanced and that hurt us a lot. When you play against a team of this level... you pay for it," the Spaniard added.

To Page 2

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**AFP**  
London

**Reuters**  
Al Rayyan, Qatar



Portugal's forward Cristiano Ronaldo (centre) arrives for a training session at Al Shahaniya Sports Club in Al Samriya, northwest of Doha, yesterday. (AFP)

**AFP**  
Doha

Portugal open their World Cup campaign against Ghana on November 24, before facing Uruguay and South Korea in Group H.





The state-of-the-art Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor yesterday welcomed 67,372 fans as hosts Qatar and Ecuador locked horns in the opening match of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. Before the start of the Group A clash of the 32-team event, a spectacular opening ceremony featured Hollywood legend Morgan Freeman alongside Qatari Ghanem al-Muftah. Later, singer Jung Kook of K-pop boy band BTS joined Qatari singer Fahad al-Kubaisi to perform *Dreamers*, a new tournament song.

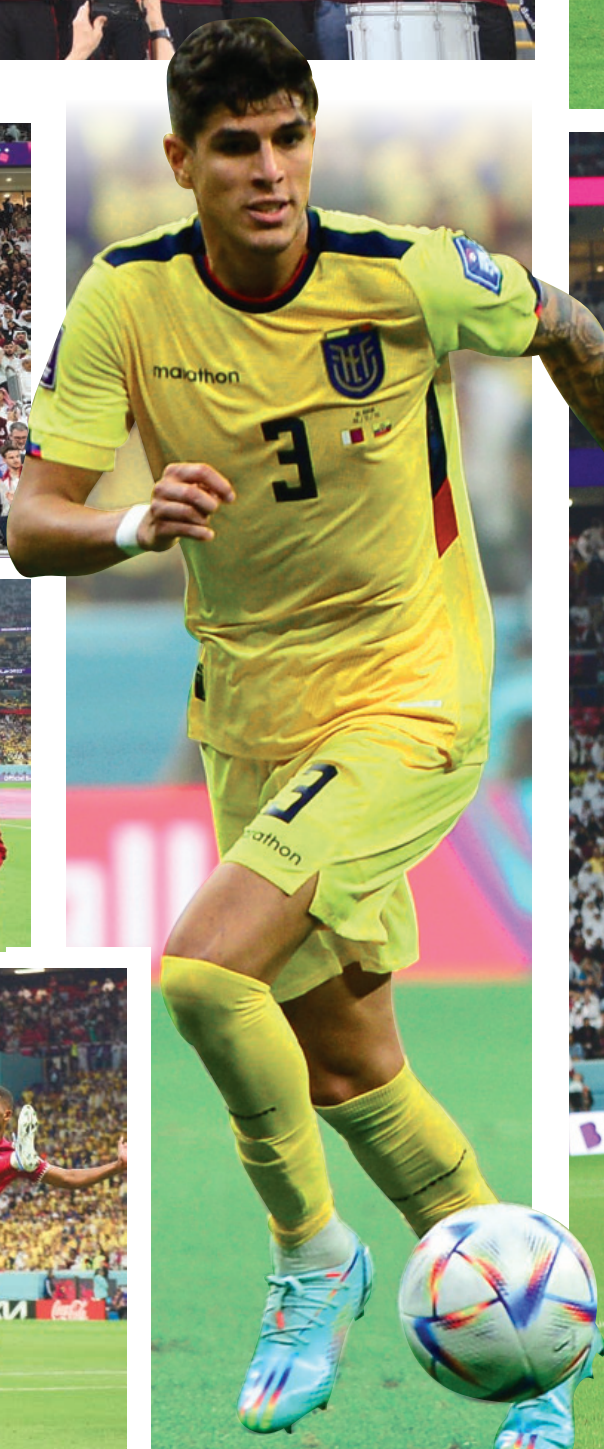
(PICTURES: AFP/REUTERS)







A wide-angle shot of a massive crowd of spectators filling a stadium. Many individuals are wearing traditional white Qatari attire (thobes and ghutras). The crowd is densely packed, and the stadium's upper tiers are visible in the background. The scene is illuminated by bright stadium lights, creating a vibrant and festive atmosphere.







Preview

# Messi's Argentina expected to roll over Saudis in opener

Reuters  
Doha

Lionel Messi's Argentina have an easy-looking start to the World Cup tomorrow based on blistering recent form and opponents Saudi Arabia's history of drubbings in tournament openers.

The South Americans are on a 36-match unbeaten run with top scorer and captain Messi playing his fifth and last World Cup in search of the elusive honour that would grant him immortality at home alongside Diego Maradona. "I see him as always... eager to enjoy the World Cup," said head coach Lionel Scaloni, trying to ease some of the pressure on his main man. "He's enjoying his team mates, training sessions, the stay and the whole process."

Saudi Arabia are ranked 48 places lower than Argentina, lost to Venezuela, Colombia and Croatia in a mixed bag of friendlies, and have a dismal record at opening games including losing 5-0 to Russia in 2018 and 8-0 to Germany in 2020.

Yet they have pedigree too: this is their sixth World Cup, they reached the last 16 in 1994, and they made it to Qatar by toppling their group ahead of Japan.



Combination of file pictures show Argentina's Lionel Messi (left) controlling the ball and Saudi's midfielder Salman al-Faraj running.

"I saw a country full of young, talented players. We achieved our first target, let's work together for the rest," said coach Herve Renard. Both teams will be noisily and massively supported

when they kick off at 1000 GMT for the first game in the Lusail Stadium, the tournament's largest venue which will also host the final.

Thousands of Saudis will flock

over the border while Argentina's traditionally large following will be swelled by a burgeoning fan base in Qatar and around the Middle East. Scaloni was pained to lose "irreplaceable" midfielder

er Giovanni Lo Celso to injury.

But he still has an enviable range of talent, from the likes of Cristian Romero and Lisandro Martinez at the back to Leandro Paredes in the middle and

Box

**Argentina vs Saudi Arabia**

**When:** Tomorrow, 1pm  
**Where:** Lusail Stadium  
**Capacity:** 80,000

**Key stats:**

- ◆ Argentina are playing in the World Cup finals for the 18th time, while Saudi Arabia are playing for the sixth time and second in a row
- ◆ Argentina won the title twice in 1978 and 1986, and also finished runner-up twice in Italy 1990 and Brazil eight years ago
- ◆ Argentina reached the final 16 in their last appearance in 2018, before losing 4-3 to the eventual champions France
- ◆ Argentina were crowned champions of Copa America last year beating hosts Brazil at the famous Maracana stadium
- ◆ Saudi Arabia lost 5-0 to hosts Russia in the opening game in 2018 then 1-0 to Uruguay before beating Egypt 2-1 in their final game of the group stage

**Previous meetings:**

- ◆ Argentina and Saudi Arabia have played each other four times, with Argentina winning once in their third meeting during the Confederations Cup on 1992
- ◆ Their last meeting ended 0-0 in a 2012 friendly

the evergreen Angel Di Maria up front with Messi.

Renard's far lesser-known team is entirely home-based, with the financial clout of the Saudi Pro League ensuring few leading players aspire to venture overseas. Argentina will pay particular attention to their captain and veteran midfielder Salman al-Faraj, whose

elegant play has helped Al Hilal dominate Asian club football in recent years.

Argentina will fully expect to beat Mexico and Poland in their other Group C games, whereas the Saudis may have to accept damage limitation in their opening match before a more realistic quest for points in their next two.

Preview

## Dark horses Denmark face tricky Tunisia test in World Cup opener

Reuters  
Doha

Denmark go into their opening World Cup game against a tricky Tunisia side tomorrow in the unusual position of being among Europe's dark horses, in with an outside chance of winning the tournament if they can get everything right in Qatar.

The key group game will be against France, a side they beat twice in the recent Nations League campaign.

But first they will need to ensure that there are no slip-ups in their opener against the Tunisians, who beat Iran 2-0 in their final pre-

World Cup friendly.

To ensure the best possible start, the Danes will turn to playmaker Christian Eriksen, who suffered a heart attack in their Euro 2020 opener against Finland in Copenhagen but who has since made a full recovery.

"After he came back, it's been unbelievable. The second he stepped into the pitch for the first time in Amsterdam, playing against Holland, he just took control of the match and scored, and since then, he's just been better and better," coach Kasper Hjulmand told Reuters in a recent interview.

Hjulmand has kept faith with many of the squad that pulled together in the wake of Eriksen's near-fatal collapse, and the fact that the 30-year-old playmaker is fully fit will make a huge difference.

Eriksen's World Cup debut came in South Africa, but

Box

**Denmark vs Tunisia**

**When:** Tomorrow, 4pm  
**Where:** Education City Stadium, Al Rayyan

**Key stats:**

- ◆ Denmark qualified for the World Cup by winning nine of 10 matches and conceding only three goals.
- ◆ Tunisia have failed to reach the knock out stage in their five previous World Cup appearances.
- ◆ In their five World Cup appearances, the Danes were knocked out at the group stage only once. Their best result was a quarter-final appearance at the 1998 World Cup in France.
- ◆ Tunisia have won only two of 15 matches at the World Cup.
- ◆ Denmark held 2018 World Cup champions France to a 0-0 draw in the group stage of that tournament.

**Previous meetings:**

- ◆ The teams have never met at the World Cup. Their last match was in 2002, when Denmark defeated Tunisia 2-1 in a friendly.

back then he was a teenager just breaking through in the senior ranks of the national team.

He comes to Qatar as a Manchester United player acknowledged as one of the world's best in opening up stubborn defences.

A 5-1 drubbing by Brazil in Paris aside, Tunisia's recent performances have been steady without being spectacular, but they are still capable of punishing any mistakes the Danes might make.

Spotlight

## Indian samba greeting for Neymar and co at World Cup

AFP  
Doha

Hundreds of fans from South Asia and South America greeted Neymar and his teammates as the Brazil squad landed in Qatar for their bid to secure a sixth World Cup.

Drum-beating Indians who have already made their mark on the tournament left Brazilians in a minority outside the luxury Doha hotel that will be the Selecao's base for the tournament.

"Why do neutral fans support Brazil? Because they are the best in the world," said Kelly Dias, a Brazilian who runs a cosmetics business in Madrid and is spending three weeks in Qatar.

"You can see it in the streets. Brazil are the favourites," added the 39-year-old.

The tens of thousands of Indian football fans in Qatar are mainly divided between Argentina and Brazil.

As with Argentina's arrival, the Brazil fans got only a fleeting glimpse of their heroes as the team bus with tinted windows drove by without stopping.

Every night the fans organise rival flash mobs in Doha where hundreds beat drums and wave the Argentinian and Brazilian flags. Smaller groups have backed England and other European nations.

The Indian contingent was joined by Brazil fans



Brazil's forward Neymar greets children during a training session at the Al Arabi SC Stadium in Doha, yesterday.

from Bangladesh and Arab nations as they waited for more than three hours outside the hotel late Saturday. Lijo Mathew, 24, said he waited because he wanted to see Neymar. Others wore yellow shirts with Neymar's name written across the back.

The Indians, mainly from Kerala state, are angry at European media reports calling them "fake fans". Qatar organisers have also slammed the reports.

"There are a lot of fans in Kerala," said Haneef, who runs a public relations firm in Doha.

"They love Neymar, they love Brazil, because, you know, India is not good at football," she said.

Haneef said she fell for the Brazil team when they last won the title in Japan in 2002.

Others are sure Brazil will triumph again on the tournament's return to Asia.

Preview

## Different worries, same goal as Mexico and Poland set for duel

Reuters  
Doha

Mexico and Poland kick-start their World Cup campaign tomorrow knowing the outcome of the clash could decide who survives beyond the group stage of the 2022 tournament.

Group favourites Argentina take on unlikely contenders Saudi Arabia in the earlier duel, and barring a major upset in that match the second spot in the final group rankings is likely to go to either Mexico or Poland.

Mexico's strong record of being unbeaten in their World Cup openers is a statistic any team could fear.

They won five and drew one in the most recent six tournaments, always making it to the knockout stage.

The last time Mexico failed to find their way past the group stage was back in 1978 — when they earned zero points in the



Mexico fans pose outside the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor yesterday.

group Poland topped.

This, however, is where the pros seem to end for Mexico this time round.

Coach Gerardo Martino's side is short in the striker department as, to the bafflement of Mexico's fans, the Argentine decided to

leave out their all-time top scorer Javier Hernandez despite his good form this season.

Further dampening the mood, Mexico lost their last pre-World Cup friendly against Sweden, conceding a late goal and heading to Qatar one day later.

**CAREFREE POLAND**

Sweden was the last side Poland beat on their way to seal their spot in the World Cup finals when they grabbed a 2-0 victory in the March playoff.

That was coach Czeslaw Michniewicz first game in

charge, and since then, the atmosphere around the team has been that of expect nothing and appreciate everything.

"Indeed, this is something new for me," said former Poland Under-21 manager who previously had no international experience with any senior squad.

"For now I am calm, I don't feel any pressure. I'm happy that all the players are healthy.

I know who I have at my disposal and the most difficult decision, the selection, is behind me. (Now let's) work according to the plan."

If Poland survives the group stage it will be the first time since 1986, and they failed to qualify for the finals more times than they qualified during the intervening years.

But Poland possess something Mexico do not — a world class striker.

Robert Lewandowski has said it may or may not be his last World Cup, but has approached it as if it is, and will want to make sure this is one to remember.

Box

**Mexico vs Poland**

**When:** Tomorrow, 7pm  
**Capacity:** 40,000

**Where:** Stadium 974

**Key stats:**

- ◆ Mexico missed out on top spot in the Concacaf World Cup qualifiers to Canada only by goal difference
- ◆ Mexico are competing at their 17th World Cup and their eighth in a row, but they have been eliminated in the last-16 at every edition since 1994
- ◆ Poland are competing at their ninth World Cup and are looking to improve on their 2018 run when they finished bottom of their group
- ◆ Polish striker Robert Lewandowski scored nine goals in the World Cup qualifiers and he has been in fine form for his new club Barcelona this season, netting 18 times in 19 games in all competitions

**Previous meetings:**

- ◆ Mexico and Poland have played each other nine times, with both teams winning three games each and three ending in draws
- ◆ Poland have not beaten Mexico since 1978, the only time the teams met at a World Cup
- ◆ The last time they played each other was in November 2017 when Raul Jimenez scored in a 1-0 win for Mexico.



Martinez's team have long been dubbed the country's "Golden Generation" but with several among the Spaniard's core group either in or nearing their 30s Qatar could be their last chance to be crowned world champions.





Preview ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

# Van Gaal eyes World Cup glory as Dutch face Senegal

‘THE FACT IS THIS GROUP OF PLAYERS IS WELL CONNECTED. THE PLAYERS WORK IN A PROFESSIONAL WAY’

By Rizwan Rehmat  
Doha

Coach Louis van Gaal believes his team has the potential to win the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 as Netherlands prepare to take on African giants Senegal in their opening match at Al Thumama Stadium today.

Van Gaal, with a wealth of experience as a coach, yesterday warned Senegal that he commands a disciplined squad that is ready to impress fans in Qatar.

“I think we could become world champions. There are teams with higher level in my view than my squad. Whether we can become world champions is another thing but we can,” Van Gaal said at a news conference ahead of today’s Group A clash.

“I believe in this squad. In 2014, we came third. We were of lesser quality compared to this team. I expect more from this squad. It depends not only on technical skills and tactical skills, but it also depends on a bit of luck, that you score at the right time and that the others don’t score,” he said.

“This group is higher in skills. They have a wonderful captain to work with in Virgil van Dijk. He’s an excellent captain. I didn’t appoint him as he was already a captain,” Van Gaal said.

Dutch skipper Van Dijk, who was also present at the press conference, yesterday said he called Senegal star Sadio Mane who has been ruled out of the World Cup with an injury.

“Yes, I called him the next morning (after Mane pulled out injured). I wanted to know how he was. There were so many rumours so as a friend I wanted to know how he was feeling,” Van Dijk said yesterday. “Unfortunately he was not well but there was hope he would be before the announcement was made. I am sad for him. He has been so important for Senegal. Obviously he is going to be a big miss for them. Hopefully we can benefit from his absence,” Van Dijk said of his Liverpool teammate Mane.

“I am excited. The last past few days have passed slowly. We can’t



Netherlands' coach Louis Van Gaal addresses a press conference at the Qatar National Convention Centre in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

wait to get going. Hopefully it will be a great adventure,” he said. “Like I said I am very excited for the first game. We are looking forward to it. We have trained hard,” the 31-year-old added.

Van Gaal said Senegal would miss Mane’s ‘extraordinary’ talent.

“Senegal are the African Cup of Nations champions. They are not just any opponents. Mane is not playing. How is their team going to play without him? That is my question,” Van Gaal said.

“I think Mane is an extraordinarily player. I wanted him when I was at Manchester United. I chased him. He can break open a match. I feel Senegal will miss him,” the 71-year-old Dutchman said.

When asked about his playing XI, Van Gaal said: “I never give up my lineup before a game. I am reasonably confident of my decisions though. Of course you always have question marks (about selection) but the choices remain the same. I also look at my opponents. I analyse them and then I pick my players looking for play-

ers who are suited for the best slots. “The fact is this group of players is well connected. The players work in a professional way. And that will always contribute to success. They have to carry out what we want. Not every group wants that. I have been coaching for 30 years. I remove the group that doesn’t listen.”

Senegal coach Aliou Cisse yesterday said his team won’t be overawed when they take on 2010 World Cup runners-up Netherlands today.

“We have a good team consisting of young players who are ready to rise to the occasion. Of course it is not easy to play without Mane who is injured but all of our players are ready for the opening match,” Cisse said at the official pre-match news conference.

“It is an important match, there’s no doubt. We want a good result. We want to start the World Cup on a good note,” he said. “Obviously it’s a great shame for Mane and for the team that he is not here. We have to think about the player safety. All coaches build their team



Netherlands' defender Virgil van Dijk attends a press conference in Doha. (AFP)

around their best player. That’s what we have done too. I hope he recovers soon. The Dutch are a good side but we need to be true to ourselves. We don’t have to copy other people’s style of play. We are



Senegal's coach Aliou Cisse attends a press conference at the Qatar National Convention Center in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

not going to invent a new Senegal style of play. We will stay true to our style.”

When asked whether his team tactics would involve an all-out attack on the Netherlands team, Cisse said: “I think you have to look at all aspects. In football you have different aspects where you need to defend and attack when you can. We have to see how the match will go.”

Cisse was full of praise for Van Gaal.

“Louis Van Gaal is the benchmark for other coaches. Everyone knows about him being a disciplinarian. At the top you have to be disciplined. I am like that also as you have to be disciplined at the top,” Cisse said.

“When you talk about the spirit and morale, of course it (Mane’s absence) affects you. He is our best player and a leader,” Senegal’s Krepin Diatta, 23, said at the press conference yesterday.

“But we are determined to do what we can without him. We are going to have to work harder individually and harder as a team.

## Box

**Senegal v Netherlands**

**When:** Monday Nov. 21, 1900 local (1600 GMT/1100 ET)  
**Where:** Al Thumama Stadium, Doha  
**Capacity:** 40,000

**Key stats:**

- ◆ Netherlands are unbeaten in their last 15 matches.
- ◆ The Netherlands’ last defeat was against the Czech Republic in the last 16 at Euro 2020.
- ◆ The Dutch are three times runners-up but failed to qualify for Russia 2018.
- ◆ Senegal are one of three African countries to reach a World Cup quarter-final.
- ◆ Senegal were unbeaten in their last four warm-up matches before the tournament.

**Previous meetings:** The teams have never previously met at the World Cup.

We still have a very strong mentality, we are comfortable being together and we are strong together,” Cisse added: “This is my fifth major competition with Senegal – three African Cup of Nations and two World Cups. I

am the only coach with this kind of experience. We are delighted to be here. We are working as well as we can. There are nerves but we are confident about our chances in this World Cup. We are humble yet confident.”

## Focus

# England expects as Southgate’s men ready to take on Iran today

By Yash Mudgal  
Doha

England have the capabilities to challenge for the title at the World Cup but their recent form does not inspire any confidence. Leading into Qatar 2022, the Three Lions have had underwhelming results, failing to win their last six games.

Despite their rich attacking resources, they have struggled in front of the goal, lacking creativity and have occasionally looked chaotic in defence too as they did in the 4-0 home loss to Hungary in the Nations League.

A thrilling 3-3 draw with Germany in their final game before the World Cup has renewed some energy.

Under manager Gareth Southgate, they reached the semi-finals at the last World Cup and final at the European Championship in 2021, but have come into Qatar not as title contenders. But a last-16 berth should be easy since they face Iran, USA and Wales in Group B.

First up for England is Iran today at the Khalifa International Stadium and Southgate will be hoping they can shed their winless run and build some momentum.

Iran, who are coached by ex-



England's forward Harry Kane takes part in a training session at the Al Wakrah Stadium on the eve of the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group B match against Iran. (AFP)

perienced Portuguese Carlos Queiroz and are 20th in FIFA’s rankings, will certainly be no walkovers. And Southgate is well aware of it.

“Iran under Carlos is a very well organised side. We are ready for the game, ready for a strong challenge and we have to be the best version of ourselves,” Southgate said yesterday.

Southgate confirmed England would be without James Maddi-

son and Kyle Walker. “In terms of player availability, everybody’s available bar James Maddison for tomorrow. It’s a little bit early for Kyle Walker but he is training with the team, so that’s ahead of where we thought he might be at this stage. Very positive. “We’re looking forward to this challenge and I’ve really liked the way the players have approached training this week,” the England manager said.

On the other hand Queiroz’s Iran side, who made light work of qualifying for Qatar, winning eight of the 10 games in the third round of Asian qualifying and conceding just four goals.

They are one of the most defensive units at this World Cup and are difficult to break down.

Queiroz, however, has talked up England’s chances of enjoying a successful run in Qatar before the two sides meet today, which he describes as a “dream” fixture.

“It is the most important game of our lives, first of all because it is the next one, and the next game is always most important for the life of coaches and players,” Queiroz said yesterday. “But also it is a unique opportunity, even for me, and I have 200-and-something international games. But it is the first time I have the opportunity to play against the England national team.

“And for the majority of our players, to play against England is like magic, a unique opportunity, a gift, because in terms of the international calendar, to play England or Germany is almost impossible. For them, for me, it is a life dream,” the Portuguese admitted.

Queiroz termed the new generation English side ‘very dangerous’

“This new generation that Gareth Southgate is bringing for the national team in my opinion is probably the most talented, the most competitive English national team since 1966.

“This team is very very functional, very practical, very realistic. I work with the generation of Rio (Ferdinand), (Paul) Scholes, (David) Beckham, all those guys. But this national team is really, really different because they have a realistic approach to any single game which makes them very, very dangerous.”

Queiroz said England will be difficult to break down.

“They have fantastic talent, guided by (Harry) Kane, and a coach that knows the team and the players for a couple of years. They reached wonderful positions in the last World Cup and the Euros, by not conceding goals. What else can I say? We can only be at the level of England to produce a great game, if we know what we need to do in the game,” he said.

**KANE EAGER TO SURPASS WAYNE ROONEY’S RECORD** Meanwhile Kane yesterday said he is eager to break the goal record for England held by retired Wayne Rooney.

“Hopefully (I’ll break it) as soon as possible,” Kane, who has scored 51 goals in 75 appear-

## Box

**England v Iran**

**When:** Monday, Nov. 21, 1600 local (1300 GMT/0800 ET)  
**Where:** Khalifa International Stadium, Doha  
**Capacity:** 40,000

**Key stats:**

- ◆ England have not won in their past six competitive matches going into the game against Iran
- ◆ Iran are playing in their third successive World Cup and have qualified five times overall, but have never progressed from the group stage
- ◆ England have contested 16 World Cups but have won the tournament just once, in 1966
- ◆ Iran scored 49 goals and conceded eight in Asian qualifying, winning 14 of their 18 matches to reach Qatar
- ◆ Iran won the Asian Cup three times in a row, from 1968-1976
- ◆ England won eight of their 10 qualifying matches, scoring 39 times and conceding only three goals

**Previous meetings:** England and Iran have never played each other in a competitive match



Iran coach Carlos Queiroz and Ehsan Hajsafi during a press conference in Doha. (Reuters)

ances, told reporters yesterday. “I know it’s there and I know people will talk about it but I like to just focus on my game. I know with the team we have we will create chances and I just need to be ready for the ones that come my way. I was lucky enough to play with Wayne and he was a

huge player who I looked up to. I watched him play in the major tournaments and it’s a huge honour to be close to him.”

The England captain scored six goals in the 2018 FIFA World Cup held in Russia when his team was beaten by Croatia in the semi-finals.