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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 BidappaDoha

t 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 hattrick 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 pickt. In reality present

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.

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FIFA president says Qatar 2022 will be best World Cup yet

Infantino pledges to make football truly global, inclusive

■IFA President Gianni Infantino has said that the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 will be the best edition yet.

In an exclusive interview with beIN Sports and conducted by leading presenter Mohamed Saadon al-Kuwari, the FIFA president said players were at peak strength having not had to play a full season before challenging for honours in the globe's biggest sporting event.

During the interview with beIN the official broadcaster of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 for the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) and France - the FIFA president was bullish about the tournament's pros-

"We are all very excited for the World Cup to kick off. It will be the best World Cup. Everything is ready - everything is geared up, the teams are here.[...] Players come without having played an entire season. They

come at peak strength, and so we should see a fantastic World Cup," he said

He added: "I have never seen a country which is so focused on an event and so prepared for an event like Oatar."

Infantino said the 2022 tournament had particular importance being the first to be held in the Arab

"There are hundreds of millions of Arabs in the world and 99.9% of these are football fans, so to bring football to this region brings a lot of pride and is crucial.[Fans] will come here and experience a country that is very Arab, but also very welcoming. It is a celebration and an enrichment of culture. The Arab world is presenting itself to the world and this is something only the World Cup can bring," he said.

He also explained that the tournament would be a unifier of people."Football unites the world. This is the one and only topic everyone can agree with.

Everyone is a fan of football -local teams, national teams or one in Europe.[...] This element of uniting 5bn people, 2/3 of the world population, watching the same event - will have a great impact in today's world. We have hardly anything that brings us together anymore, but football

Looking ahead, the FIFA president pledged to make football global and

"My promise is to continue to work hard to make football truly global, so it has the same value globally as it does in Europe. We need to bring it up and create good teams, competitions, and investment all over the world and raise the global level of football for girls and boys. We will do that in the next four years," he concluded.



Presenter Mohamed Saadon al-Kuwari with FIFA president Gianni Infantino during the interview.

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Valencia shines as Ecuador beat Qatar in opening clash



Qatar's Akram Afif drills a shot towards the Ecuador goal in the opening match of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 at Al Bayt Stadium yesterday. PICTURES: Shaji Kayamkulam



Ecuador players celebrate their 2-0 win over Qatar in the opening match of the FIFA World Cup Qatar

Ecuador were physically stronger and technically superior than the home side. They barely gave a sniff to Qatar's attacking pair Almoez Ali and Akram Afif, who were outmuscled by the Ecuador defence.

Gustavo Alfaro's men had kept a clean sheet in each of their last six matches, last conceding a goal against Argentina back in March. They also held five-time World champions Brazil to draws in the last two outings, as they came through the tough South American qualifiers in fourth place to qualify for the World Cup.

Ecuador, though, had the most stressful build-up to the football tles to keep their place after Chile and Peru had lodged appeals with FIFA over the eligibility of Byron Castillo's involvement in qualifying games.

Alfaro took the tough decision of not bringing Castillo to Qatar to avoid the risk of sanctions. They also had to face a host nation in the opening game of a World Cup. Ecuador could not have asked for a tougher start to their campaign.

Qatar, on the contrary, have had the longest possible preparation by a team for a World Cup in history. Since their breakthrough Asian Cup triumph in 2019, Sanchez's men have travelled to three continents, taking part in the 2019 Copa America, 2021 Concacaf Gold Cup and the European qualifiers earlier this year.

They have also sat out of the Qatar Stars League this season. spending six months in Europe for training and playing countless practice matches. The reason to train outside of Qatar was to make them play as a unit and improve their technical and mental aspects of the game.

But on the biggest stage of

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED BUT NEED MORE, **SAYS ECUADOR COACH**

Doha: It was mission accomplished, said Ecuador coach **Gustavo Alfaro** after a 2-0 win over hosts Qatar in the World Cup opener yesterday, but he warned that he will need more from his men to reach the knockout round.

It was the type of offensive display Alfaro wanted to see from his attack that had sputtered coming into the World Cup, with veteran striker Enner Valencia netting two first half goals to match team's haul from their six previous matches.

The Group A contest was viewed as a must win by both Oatar and Ecuador if they were to have any chance of getting to the next stage

Goals might not come as easily against Ecuador's other two group opponents, the Netherlands and

While they ended a goal-scoring drought on Sunday, the lack of finishing in the second half, particularly after Valencia left the game in the 75th minute, was worrying.

"The important thing is that we got the win," said Alfaro. "We did what we needed to do to win this game. At the half (interval) I asked my players are



they happy and they said, no that they can play better. I congratulated them for the win but told them we have to do better.'

Netherlands, who will prove a far tougher hurdle when the teams meet on Friday.

"If we want to go to the knockout stage we need to finish well," said Alfaro. "If we want to go further we need to improve on this.

'Some teams, even after winning their first game,

do not qualify." Valencia sensed an opportutheir nights. Oatar players looked

frozen, clearly overawed by the historic occasion. This was a nervous and disjointed perform-

Their defeat yesterday was the first time a host nation has lost the opening match in the World Cup's 92-year history. Now they face the ignominy of becoming the second host country, after South Africa in 2010, to crash out of the World Cup in the group

After a spectacular, but short opening ceremony, Valencia found the net with a lunging close-range header to silence the crowd. But the home fans were up on their feet again, as VAR disallowed the goal for a marginal side. It was a huge let off for Qatar goalkeeper Saad al-Sheeb, who looked uncomfortable guarding the goal, as did the defence.

nity and al-Sheeb did Ecuador a favour by catching the shin of their captain in the box resulting in a penalty.

Valencia took the spot kick and took two steps before putting the ball in the net, even as al-Sheeb had dived to his right early. The hosts' night took for the worse as Valencia was to haunt them

The Fenerbahce forward was left unmarked as he lunged into Angelo Preciado's cross to head past al-Sheeb again.

"I dreamt so many times about winning this opening match. This was a dream that I managed to score and help my team get the three points," Valencia said yes-

"We managed to score a couple of quick goals which helped us to get control of the game and win the three points... We think we can go very far and perform well," the captain added.

Qatar had a chance to stay in the game in the last minute of added time off the first half, but Ali sent his header wide, even as many in the crowd called it a night early.

That was the only meaningful chance Qatar had as the game petered out in the second half. Qatar did well to not concede any more goals, while Ecuador played within themselves and still had a couple of decent scoring opportunities.

For Qatar, it's African Champions Senegal up next on November 25 at the Al Thumama Stadium. Senegal are without injured Sadio Mane, but even in the absence of their star striker they pose a bigger challenge to Qatar than Ecuador.

Star Pla___yer

Japan's Mitoma preparing to hit Germany on the counter in opener

apan's Kaoru Mitoma believes Germany could be vulnerable to the counterattack when they meet a Samurai Blue side stacked with pacy attacking talent in their World Cup opener on Wednes-

The lively left winger is not underestimating the challenge that faces Japan against the four-times World Cup win-

ners at Khalifa International Stadium but thinks they have a chance of making a winning start if they prepare well.

"Of course, Germany is (one of the) best teams in the world but they have weaknesses so we have to get ready to play against them. If we are together, we can win," he told reporters after training yesterday.

"They put many players in front of the attacking space, so they have a weakness against the counter-attack, so we are preparing for this," he added.

Mitoma has enjoyed a meteoric rise this year, scoring two goals off the bench against Australia in March to seal Japan's ticket to Qatar before making a flying start to his career with Brighton and Hove Albion. A late developer after spurning a professional contract to spend three years at university, Mitoma has earned comparisons to South Korea's Son Heung-min after some outstanding performances in the English Premier League.

"The Premier League is

a high level, high intensity, and that helps me a lot," the 25-year-old added. "After playing in the first XI, I felt a bit more confident.

I've only played a few games so I need to play more games. It'll help me a lot to play against Germany, they're a very good team with good organisation."

Mitoma, who arrived late in Qatar after suffering a bout of illness, is by no means guaranteed a start against the Germans with fellow attackers Takumi Minamino, Daichi



Japan's players take part in a training session at the AI Sadd SC training grounds in Doha, yesterday.

Kamada, Takefusa Kubo also in

"We've got a good balance of young players and senior play-

ers," he said."We have to be energetic and of course I will do

Japan also face former cham-

pions Spain and Costa Rica in Group E on their seventh straight visit to the World Cup finals.

Page caps remarkable rise by taking Wales back to World Cup

London

ob Page will become the first man to lead Wales at a World Cup since 1958 today - when his side take on the United States - after a remarkable rise from the lower tiers of English league football.

A rugged centre-back in his playing days, Page played for a clutch of clubs including Watford, Sheffield United and Cardiff but only spent one season in the Premier League.

His managerial career also had a humble start, first with League One side Port Vale, then with Northampton, also in the third tier of English football.

Page started on the pathway towards becoming Wales manager when he took over the under-17s, under-19s and under-21s in 2017.

He was promoted to assistant manager under Ryan Giggs in 2019 before becoming caretaker boss the following year after Giggs was arrested on suspicion of assaulting his then girlfriend.

As the legal process dragged on, Page was given the chance to lead Wales at last year's delayed Euro 2020.

Former Manchester United and Wales star Giggs eventually resigned from his role earlier this year. He will face a re-trial on domestic violence charges after a jury failed to reach a verdict in August.

Matching a remarkable run to the semifinals of Euro 2016 was always going to be a difficult task for Wales, a nation of just three million people.

But they again surpassed expectations by qualifying from the group stage before a 4-0 demolition by an inspired

Wales back at World Cup is 'more than sport': Drakeford

Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford said yesterday that his country's first World Cup appearance in 64 years will put the nation on the global map and was more than sport

The country of 3.2 million people has only qualified for the World Cup once before, in 1958, but led by former Real Madrid winger Gareth Bale they are finally back at football's top table.

Their opening match in Qatar is against the United States today, followed by Group B games against Iran and neighbours England

Drakeford, Wales's highest-ranking politician, told AFP in Doha that it represented "more than sport" "It is part of demonstrating what it

means to be a small nation, but a small nation that's able to be there on that global stage. 'The World Cup will be in five billion households around the globe and many,

"So it is a major opportunity to raise the profile of Wales for people to understand that in the United Kingdom there

many of those will never even have heard

are four different nations, each with their own distinctive identity and history. 'That's an enormous opportunity.

Drakeford added that in a country with a proud sporting heritage, particularly in rugby, playing once more at the football World Cup "stands very tall and very proud in the sporting history of Wales".

The World Cup kicked off yesterday when the hosts Qatar played Ecuador at Al Bayt Stadium. (AFP)



Denmark in the last 16. Like his predecessors Page, who won 41 caps for Wales, has had to rely on moments of brilliance from Gareth Bale to reach heights as a coach he never managed as a player.

Prior to Euro 2016, Wales' last major tournament was in 1958, when they reached the World Cup quarter-finals. Now they have reached consecutive major tournaments for the first time in

Former Real Madrid star Bale was again the hero with two goals in the play-off semi-final victory over Austria

their history.

and a deflected winner to see off Ukraine in June's final.

But the ability of the 33-year-old to continue rising to the occasion for his country despite limited playing time at club level is also down to clever management.

"I pull in each of the senior players -Wayne Hennessey, Joe Allen, Aaron Ramsey, Gareth, all of the players who might need a little bit more care - and just see where they're at," Page told FourFourTwo magazine.

"I show them that respect.

"I have five minutes with them and check what they need to get them out

"I'll work backwards - if the game is on Saturday, tell me what you need and we'll factor that into training."

The results speak for themselves and Page was rewarded with a fouryear contract in September to take him through to the next World Cup,

"He's done an incredible job coming in in difficult circumstances," said Bale. "Everyone has a great relationship with him.

need to work, we work hard. "I guess that's why you achieve big things when your team is happy and your

manager is doing well." Just getting to football's biggest stage is not enough for Page. "We're not just going out there to make the numbers up," he

Clashes with the USA and Iran in their first two games give Wales reason to dream again. Beating England in their final Group B match would make Page's men national

"We have that good mixture where we can have a bit of fun but when we

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Fit-again Bale ready for Wales World Cup opener against USA, Allen ruled out

Reuters

Al Rayyan, Qatar

ales captain Gareth Bale declared himself fit and ready for their opening match at the World Cup in Qatar against the United States today, but midfielder Joe Allen has been ruled out as he recovers from a hamstring injury.

Bale's fitness has been a major concern for Wales, with the 33-year-old yet to play a full match for Los Angeles FC due to injury is-The forward helped his side win

the Major League Soccer Cup, but he heads into the World Cup having played just 28 minutes of competitive football since September. Asked where he is in terms of his recovery to full fitness, Bale told re-

porters yesterday: "I am right where I want to be. I am here, right before the first game and ready to go. "We have all been training hard in the last week and adapting to the heat and time zones and we have no

"We put the hard work in and it's game time tomorrow and that's hopefully where we can step up and deliver what needs to be delivered."

excuses now.



Wales' forward Gareth Bale attends a press conference at the Qatar National Convention Center in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

Wales will be playing at a World Cup for the first time in 64 years, building on their achievement of reaching the Euro 2016 semi-finals and the Euro 2020 last 16.

"As a kid you dream of seeing

Wales at the World Cup but to actually be in the team that achieves it is an incredible feeling," said Bale, Wales' all-time top scorer with 40

goals in 108 games. While Bale will lead Wales at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium today evening, the team will miss Allen due to a hamstring injury he picked in mid-September while playing for

"We said from the start, we're going to give every chance that he can to play that first game, but he's not going to make it," coach Rob

'We could have pushed him but if he breaks down then he's definitely out of the tournament. Risk over reward. We're not going to push him to the point of losing him."

With England expected to advance as winners of Group B, the US, Wales and Iran could face a tight battle for second place to qualify for the knockouts.

"You look at England and USA, naturally people will talk about them as the top two and then us and Iran. But we know on our day, we have proven in the Nations League... that we can more than compete as well," Page said.

'We are new to the tournament and there might be a few surprises on the way. There's no pressure on us, we are going to enjoy it. But we are going to compete... We have earned the right to be here and I want to show the world how good



Stadium in Doha on the eve of the Qatar 2022 World Cup match against USA. (AFP)

Star Pla_



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

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Ronaldo will be 'phenomenal' at World Cup, says Neves

AFP

ristiano Ronaldo enters the World Cup under a cloud of controversy but his Portugal teammate Ruben Neves believes the forward will have a "phenomenal" tournament.

Reduced to a peripheral role at Manchester United this season, the superstar last week lashed out at his club and United coach Erik ten Hag in a TV interview.

The five-time Ballon d'Or

winner remains the spearhead for Portugal at 37 despite his struggles at club level and Neves is confident he can shine at his fifth World Cup.

"From what I've seen in training he is in a spectacular state of form," Neves said yesterday.

"We're not worried about anything. We know that we can work very well so that individuals stand out. If we are good, Cristiano will be phenomenal."

Ronaldo, with 117 goals, is the all-time leading goalscorer in men's international football.

Footage emerged last week

of a seemingly tense handshake between Ronaldo and his Manchester United and Portugal teammate Bruno Fernandes.

But Neves played down speculation over tensions in the squad.

"I don't think there's controversy in the dressing room, it's impossible for us to go around without some controversy," said

the midfielder. "There's more outside the camp and in the media than in the dressing room. It's all been said, and we have a spectacular

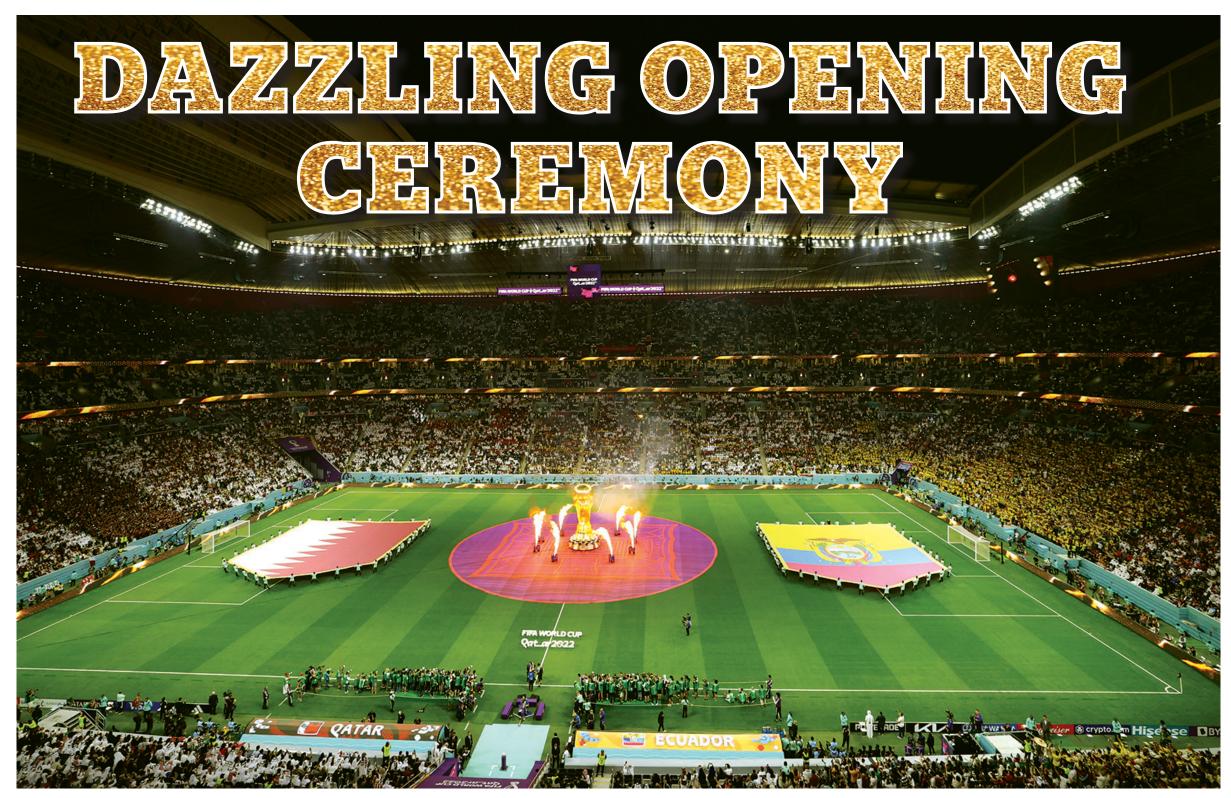
atmosphere."

Wolves player Neves, 25, has been linked with a move away from the struggling Premier League club and was asked if he might leave in January. "I'm leaving Wolves this

month, I hope at least until the 18th (of December, the World Cup final)," he joked.

"I don't want to come back earlier. My big goal is to stay here as long as possible and give my best for the team."

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





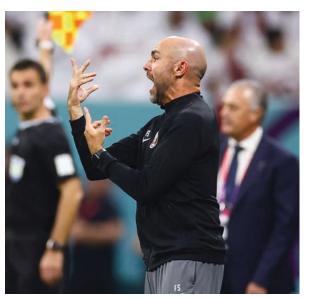
The state-of-the-art Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor yesterday welcomed 67,372 fans as hosts Qatar and **Ecuador locked horns** in the opening match of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. Before the start of the Group A clash of the 32-team event. a spectacular opening ceremony featured Hollywood legend Morgan 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)





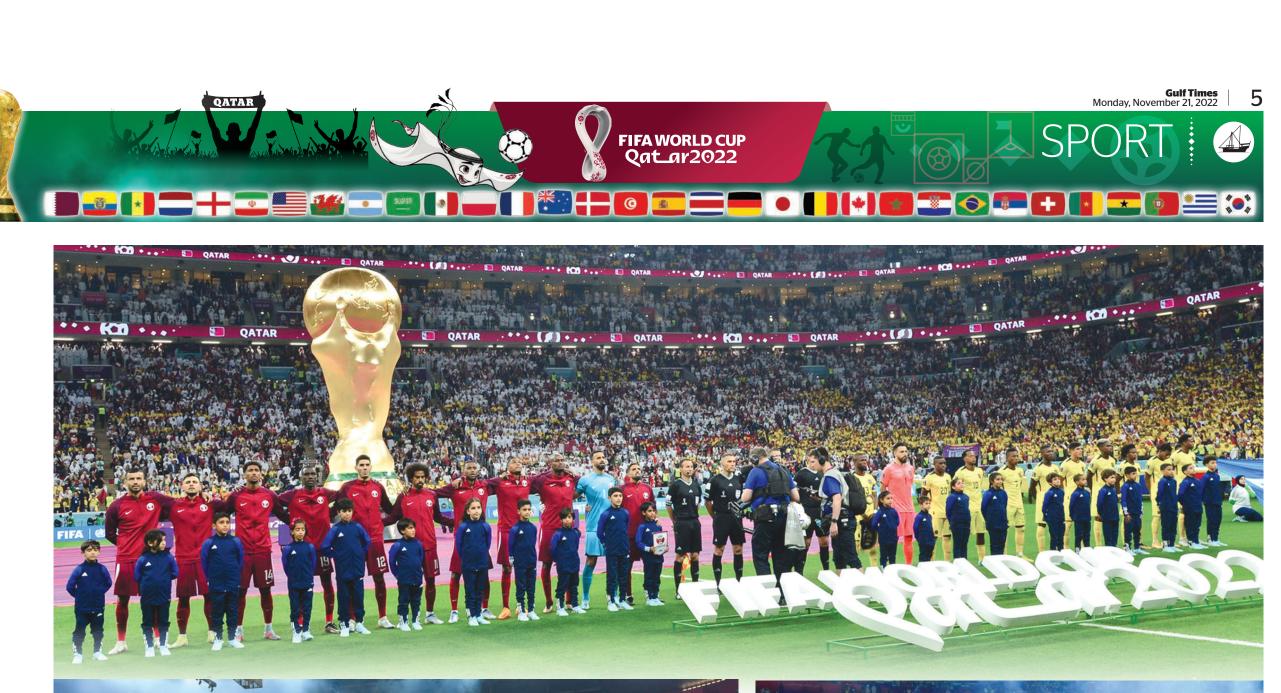




























Messi's Argentina expected to roll over Saudis in opener

Reuters Doha

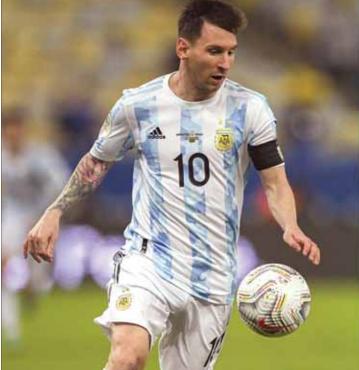
ionel Messi's Argentina have an easy-looking start to the World Cup Itomorrow based on blistering recent form and opponents Saudi Arabia's history of

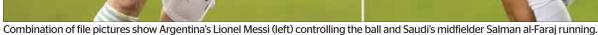
drubbings in tournament open-

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 2002.

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 topping their group ahead of Japan.





"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

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" midfield-

er Giovani 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 Argentina vs Saudi Arabia

When: Tomorrow, 1pm Where: Lusail Stadium

Capacity: 80,000

- ◆ Argentina are playing in the World Cup finals for the 18th time, while Saudi Arabia are playing for the sixth time and second in
- ◆ 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.

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Dark horses Denmark face tricky Tunisia test in World Cup opener

Reuters Doha

enmark go into their ppening World Cup game against a tricky Tunisia side tomorrow 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-

Denmark's coach Kasper Hjulmand leads a training session of his team at Al Sailiya SC in Doha, yesterday.

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.

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 dif-

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

When: Tomorrow, 4pm

Denmark vs Tunisia

Capacity: 40,000



Where: Education City Stadium, Al Rayyan

Key stats: ified 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.

Indian samba greeting for Neymar and co at World Cup

undreds 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

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 Oatar.

"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

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 stop-

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 Nevmar. Others wore vellow shirts with Nevmar'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.



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

Doha

exico and Poland kick-start World Cup campaign tomorrow knowing the outcome of the clash could decide who survives beyond the group stage of the 2022 tourna-

ment. 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 Po-

land 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

1986, and they failed to qualify for the finals more times than they qualified during the intervening years.

stage it will be the first time since

But Poland possess something Mexico do not - a world class

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.



competitions

Previous meetings: ◆ Mexico and Poland have played each other nine times, with both teams winning three games each and three ending in

ing to improve on their 2018 run when they finished bottom of

◆ 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

◆ 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.

France rocked as Benzema ruled out of the World Cup

DEFENDING CHAMPIONS FRANCE BEGIN THEIR DEFENCE TOMORROW WHEN THEY TAKE ON AUSTRALIA

rance's hopes of successfully defending the World Cup were dealt a huge blow late as Ballon d'Or winner Karim Benzema was ruled out of the tournament in Qatar with an injured left thigh.

The 34-year-old Real Madrid striker had been struggling with the injury for some time and had played less than half an hour of football in his club's last six games before the World Cup.

On Saturday, he took part in full training for the first time since the World Cup holders gathered last week ahead of the tournament.

He was forced to withdraw from the session at the home stadium of Qatari champions Al Sadd with the injury and was taken for tests.

The French Football Federation (FFF) later said in a statement that the injury "will require a recovery period of three weeks", ruling out any prospect of him being fully fit for the tournament which finishes on December 18.

"I am extremely sad for Karim, for whom this World Cup was a major objective," France coach Didier Deschamps was quoted as saying in the FFF statement.

"Despite this new blow for the France team I have full faith in my squad. We will do all we can to rise to the huge challenge that awaits us."

The 36-year-old Olivier Giroud is set to benefit from Benzema's absence at the World Cup by coming into the France attack alongside Kylian Mbappe and Antoine Griezmann.



However, under FIFA rules Deschamps can still call up a replacement for an injured player until today, on the eve of their first game.

France begin their defence of the trophy tomorrow, when they take on Australia in Al Wakra.

They will also play Denmark and Tunisia in Group D as they aim to become the first team since Brazil in 1962 to retain the World Cup.

POGBA, KANTE, NKUNKU ALREADY ÓUT

Benzema's injury is a major blow for Deschamps, whose preparations for the tournament had already been hampered by fitness problems.

France have come to Qatar without the key duo of Paul Pogba and N'Golo

Kante, their starting midfield pairing from the successful 2018 World Cup campaign, who were both ruled out due to injury before Deschamps named his

Back-up goalkeeper Mike Maignan and centre-back Presnel Kimpembe also withdrew before RB Leipzig forward Christopher Nkunku had to pull out after suffering a knee injury in France's final training session before

departing for Qatar. Nkunku was replaced in the squad by Eintracht Frankfurt forward Randal

Manchester United defender Raphael Varane has also been struggling to prove his fitness since coming off in tears with a leg injury in a game against Chelsea on October 22.

Benzema, who will turn 35 next month, had targeted the World Cup to cap off a remarkable career renaissance. He won the Ballon d'Or after scoring

44 goals in 46 games for Real Madrid last season as the Spanish club won the Champions League and La Liga. Benzema had previously been frozen out of the France team for five-and-ahalf years because of his involvement in a blackmail scandal over a sex tape in-

volving his former teammate Mathieu That saw him miss France's victorious 2018 World Cup campaign and led to him being handed a one-year suspended prison sentence as well as a fine

of 75,000 euros. On winning the Ballon d'Or he said: "There are things that are still left to be done. I hope to be in the squad for Qatar, to go to the World Cup and do eve-





Points at premium for US and Wales in high-stakes opener

Reuters

he United States and Wales will head into today's World Cup clash knowing that victory could decide one of Group B's two qualifiers, with England fancied as heavy favourites to advance as group winners.

With a golden generation of talent spearheaded by Gareth Bale and playing at their first World Cup in 64 years, Wales will be out to echo their recent successes at European level, having reached the Euro 2016 semi-finals and the last 16 at

Manager Rob Page called up nine Premier League-based players to his World Cup squad - which US coach Gregg Berhalter said the Americans must not underestimate, despite Wales's preparations being hampered by injuries to key players including Joe Allen and Aaron

"I think that, at least to the American media, Wales is under-rated," Berhalter told reporters. "When I look at their squad, it's basically a Premier League

"To me, it's a really good squad, a formidable squad. They've been in international competition before, they know

"And it's going to be a very difficult game."

The US team endured a rocky run-up to Oatar and failed to score in September friendlies against Japan and Saudi Arabia, but Berhalter's youthful albeit unproven squad will look to silence critics when they return to the World Cup stage after

The Americans will be entering the contest with a rare clean bill of health with most of their first-choice squad healthy and available, and Christian Pulisic, Gio Reyna and Weston McKennie will all be out to leave their mark in their first World Cup appearance.

LONG-AWAITED RETURN

With Page boasting a settled core of players, many of whom gained vital bigtournament experience through the last two European Championship campaigns, Wales will have reason for quiet confidence on their return to soccer's show-

Neco Williams and Brennan Johnson



US football coach Gregg Berhalter and player Tyler Adams are seen during a press conference at the Main Media Center, Doha, vesterday. (Reuters)

stepped up of late, allowing Page to be less reliant on veterans Bale and Ramsey, although their form and fitness will still be vital to Wales's campaign in Qatar.

With the old guard finally realising their World Cup dream in the twilight of their careers, Ramsey paid tribute to former manager Gary Speed for laying the foundation for Wales's upturn in fortunes before his death in 2011.

"Gary is always in our thoughts with everything that we have done," Ramsey said. "If you look at where we are now, you can see it has Gary's fingerprints all over it. He was the one who got things moving for us.

"Gary had this way about him that you would believe anything that he would say. One of the targets that he set when he first came in was to qualify for that World

"We didn't manage to do so, so this

are among the younger talents who have makes it even more special that we have actually gone on to do that now. This means everything."

TYLER ADAMS NAMED US CAPTAIN FOR WORLD CUP

Midfielder Tyler Adams has been named captain of the US Men's National Team for the World Cup in Qatar.

Adams, 23, will wear the armband when the US opens play in Group B today against Wales.

Adams, who plays professionally for the Premier League's Leeds United, has been the American captain for nine of his 32 previous caps. Seven of those games

were during World Cup qualifying.

"We're proud to announce Tyler is the captain for the World Cup," USMNT coach Berhalter said yesterday.

"We think he has great leadership capabilities, he leads by his actions and his

Adams is the youngest captain for the US team at a World Cup since 22-yearold Harry Keough in 1950.

"It's a huge honour for me, obviously, to be named captain of this team," Adams said. "A very young team, but a lot of credit to my teammates because anyone throughout our leadership council can wear that arm band and represent us with pride and represent us in the right way." Adams played for the US at the U17

World Cup in 2017 and made his senior national team debut against Portugal later that year.

The Wappinger, NY, native spent his youth career in the New York Red Bulls academy.

He recorded two goals and 11 assists in 52 MLS matches (49 starts) with the Red Bulls from 2016-18.

Adams played for RB Leipzig in the German Bundesliga from 2019-22 before joining Leeds United last July.



of their opening match at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022. (AFP)

◆ Wales are playing in the World Cup finals for the first time in 64

◆ The last time Wales played in the World Cup, in 1958, they reached the quarter-finals, suffering a 1-0 defeat to eventual champions Brazil as Pele scored the winner. The US reached the final 16 in their last appearance in 2014, suf-

fering a 2-1 defeat to Belgium.

♦ Wales qualified for the Qatar World Cup by beating Ukraine 1-0 in a playoff final after a 2-1 victory over Austria in the last four. Rob Page's side had sealed second place in their qualifying group behind Belgium.

US qualified after finishing third in CONCACAF qualifying behind Canada and Mexico.

Previous meetings

◆ US and Wales have played each other only twice, both in friendlies, with the US winning 2-0 in 2003 and the other game ending in a goalless draw in 2020.

Lukaku 'out of first two Cup matches'

Doha

omelu Lukaku will not play for Belgium at the World Cup until at least their final Group F match against Croatia, a team source told AFP yesterday.

The forward did not take part in the Red Devils' first proper training session since they arrived in Qatar on Friday as he continues his recovery from a hamstring injury.

Lukaku is Belgium's all-time top scorer with 68 goals in 102 appearances and was called up to their World Cup squad despite coach Roberto Martinez admitting he was not fully fit.

"It would be better for us if he was there for the first game (against Canada on Wednesday), but I cannot tell you when he will be back," Atletico Madrid midfielder Axel Witsel told reporters.

"The most important thing is how he feels. I was in his place in the last European Championship when I came back from an injury and I'm sure we'll have Romelu back very soon."

Lukaku has endured a difficult past 18 months, moving back to Inter Milan on loan after a dismal season with Chelsea. However, the 29-year-old has played just twice for Inter since August after first picking up the injury in a 3-1 defeat at Lazio.

He returned to action in style last month, scoring in a 4-0 win against Viktoria Plzen that ensured Inter's passage to the last 16 of the Champions League but he then injured his hamstring again a few days later.

Martinez has to decide who will replace Lukaku up front for the clash with Canada. Fenerbahce forward Michy Batshuayi started in Belgium's one warm-up match before the tournament, a 2-1 defeat to Egypt on Friday.

Batshuayi was replaced by Lens forward Lois Openda, who pulled a goal back in the 76th minute of the clash in Kuwait City. Belgium also take on Morocco before meeting 2018 World Cup finalists Croatia at the start of next month as they try to improve on their run to the semi-

finals four years ago. 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.

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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

oach 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

"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 vesterday. "Unfortunately he was not well but there was hope he would be before the announcement was am end 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 extraor-

dinarily 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 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 players 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 im 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

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

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

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

"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 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.

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.

England v Iran

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."

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

By Yash Mudgal

ngland 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 semifinals 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 momen-

Iran, who are coached by ex-



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 Maddison 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 nation-

"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 dan-

"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-





Iran coach Carlos Queiroz and Ehsan Hajisafi 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 maior 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.