



By Sahan Bidappa

nents Saudi Arabia.

n the eve of Argentina's opening match of the World Cup, there was so much focus on Lionel Messi that there was

hardly a mention of their oppo-

Qatar 2022 is Messi's fifth and almost certainly the last one and there has been talk of how the left-footed magician could lead Argentina to their first title since 1986, adding the most important and the last piece of silverware to his trophy-laden career. But there was a gentle reminder from Saudi's French coach Herve Renard a day before the match, when he said on Monday: "We

haven't come to this World Cup

just for a jolly. We have come

here to be the best we can." Yesterday, the Saudi players proved Renard right, creating one of the greatest upsets of all time by stunning Messi led-Argentina 2-1 at a packed Lusail Stadium, a result described by Messi as a "heavy blow". At the end of the Group C match, the Argentine fans - who made most of the 88,012-record crowd were left distraught as the Saudi fans could not stop jumping with joy. It was a game of two halves literally, with Argentina failing to capitalise on numerous openings they had in the first half and only led 1-0 through Messi's 10thminute penalty.

In the second half, Saudi shredded the script dramatical-

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Argentina's Lionel Messi (le	(a)
and Rodrigo De Paul are de after the match. (Reuters)	ejected

ly. The Green Falcons equalised through Saleh al-Shehri in the 48th-minute before their most influential player Salem al-Dawsari produced a superb strike five minutes later to send the delirious crowd into a frenzy.

The shell-shocked Argentina team - one of the pre-tournament favourites - did not know how to react as Saudi defended heroically for one of the biggest shocks in the 92-year World Cup history. It was a courageous and brilliant performance from Renard's men. Left to guard their lead for 51 minutes - including 14 minutes of stoppage time - the Saudi players led by goalkeeper Mohamed al-Owais and central defender Hassan al-Tambakti threw their body on the line. Al-Owais rightly won the man of the match for his commanding display in which he made five spectacular saves, two claims and 14

accurate passes, while also playing the role of a sweeper-keeper at times and clearing long balls from the midfield.

Shots on goal

On target

Possession

Fouls

Yellow Cards

Red Cards

Offsides

Corner Kicks

Saves

Saudi Arabia

31%

Saudi's performance had the combination of pressing, energy and passion in equal measure. Whether they could sustain it till the final whistle was a big question mark and when they did, the tireless players, substitutes and support celebrated wildly and so did the Saudi fans.

"All the stars in the sky were aligned for us, but don't forget Argentina are still a fantastic team," said Renard after the pulsating clash. The Saudi coach warned his players not to celebrate for too long, saying: "This is football, sometimes totally crazy things can happen."

Charismatic Renard, who has previously led Zambia and the Ivory Coast to Africa Cup of Nations glory was also sacked after a few matches in charge of Cambridge United in 2004 was a calming influence on the pitch side and deserves credit



Saudi Arabia's Salem al-Dawsari scores their second goal. (Reuters)

for Saudi's unlikely victory. "We needed to get this result, it will be one for the (history) books, but as a coach I'm always asking for more from my players, so let's stay humble," he said.

The 54-year-old's tactic to play high line was fraught with danger but on the day it was hugely rewarding. Saudi are ranked 51st in the world, ironically one above hosts Qatar, and they had to take their chances and be more clinical upfront against third-ranked Argentina.

Lionel Scaloni's Argentina came into the tournament among the favourites on the back of a 36-game unbeaten run that included winning the 2021 Copa America. There was no sign of the streak ending as Messi converted a penalty for his seventh goal in 20 World Cup appearances to put his side ahead after Saud Abdulhamid had pulled Leandro Parades to the ground in the box. The 35-year-old became the first Argentinian to score in four World Cups - 2006, 2014, 2018 and 2022 - and the fifth man in history to achieve the feat. There was a feeling he would add even

more yesterday. And he did find the net but only for the goal to be ruled out by off-side. Inter Milan striker Lautaro Martinez too had two of his goals called off side, with the second one being extremely unlucky after VAR ruled the tip of his shoulder was a fraction ahead of Abdulhamid. Saudi's high line was working as Argentina had committed seven off-sides in the first half as the South Americans had just a goal to show for all their dominance and they paid heavily for their profligacy in

front of the goal. Saudi, meanwhile, came out with renewed energy despite losing captain Salman al-Faraj to injury at the end of first half. Renard's half-time talk created wonders as they turned the game upside down with an attacking display. Cristian Romero was clearly ripe to be picked off as the Tottenham defender strug-

gled in the opening 45 minutes and was uncomfortable after the restart too. The equaliser came soon for Saudi after al-Shehri collected a pass from Feras al-Brikan and then beat Romero on the left, as the ball bounced past goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez's outstretched hands.

As Argentina panicked with Scaloni making triple substitution, Saudi went for the kill with al-Dawsari producing a moment of magic. His sensational rightfooter came after he evaded a lunging Parades as the forward beat Martinez to land the ball into the top corner.

As the rattled Argentina players went to fetch the ball, Messi gestured to his players not to drop their shoulders.

The captain came close to bringing his side back into the game but before he could latch onto a loose ball in the box, al-Tambakti made an outstanding last-ditch tackle. Argentina did win many corners but were unable to make use of it as al-Owais was alert to any danger.

As the Slovenian referee Slavko Vincic blew the final whistle after a never-ending stoppage time, the Saudi players breathed a sigh of relief and collapsed to the ground in absolute joy. The biggest win of their lives will make them believe they can enter the last 16 of the World Cup for only the second time.

Hervard's men take on Poland on Saturday, while a bruised Argentina face Mexico and aim for a victory needed to keep their World Cup hopes alive.

Pre___view

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Germany won't take Japan lightly in opening tie today

FOUR-TIME WORLD CUP WINNERS FACE THE 'SAMURAI BLUE' AT KHALIFA INTERNATIONAL STADIUM

By Rizwan Rehmat

our-time World Cup champions Germany are keen to hit the ground running when they take on Asian giants Japan but coach Hansi Flick said his team won't take the 'Samurai Blue' lightly.

The two teams clash for the first time at a World Cup when they face off at the iconic Khalifa International Stadium today. Champions in 1954, 1974,

1990 and 2014, Germany are clear title favourites in Qatar. After tackling Japan - the three-time Asian champions

- Germany take on Spain and Costa Rica in Group E of the 32team tournament being held for the first time in the region. Japan, on the other hand,

Round of 16 though they are making their seventh trip to the World Cup. The German coach said his team respects the quality of the

have never gone beyond the

Japanese side. "I have to come out as a fan of Japanese football. The players are tactically and technically very well trained. It is a very big task that awaits us. But we're going into the game well prepared. Anything is possible, you saw that today (Saudi Arabia beating Argentina). We don't underestimate an opponent,"

Flick said yesterday. "Many of Japan's players play in the Bundesliga and almost all of them are very agile, very fast, and are strong players," Flick said at a news conference.

'They have great technique

so we have to be careful." Flick, who saw Joachim Lowcoached Germany go out in the first round at Russia 2018, will have the services of experienced Manuel Neuer. Muller and Neuer are appearing in their fourth World Cup.





Germany's head coach Hansi Flick (left) and Japan's coach Haiime Moriyasu give separate press conferences at the Qatar National Convention Center in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

becoming world champions. "I'm totally happy that we have these players in the team, That's why we're here in Qatar. that they play for Germany. I think you have to deal with the With their quality, they give us pressure positively. We have to an enormous number of opporgo to our absolute performance tunities," Flick said. limit, you can expect that from

"All the

top teams

set them-

selves the

goal of

"We have had very good the players because they have training sessions in enormous qualities," he added. the last few days. Japan manager Hajime Moriyasu knows his team is We have had good training condiup against the might of Gerfor the many in the Group E clash tions today. The 54-year-old made game. a candid admission at the "The group is very strong, but we pre-match press conference that his team would fight go into our matches but won't get ahead of with a positive mind. We themselves considare happy ering the high skillset the Germans that things are starting for us," Flick said yesterday.

bring to a game. "We are very grateful to the Germans, they are role models for us," Moriyasu said yesterday. are still developing and of course at the same time have incorporated good them into our playing style. So,

of mixed feelings about playing against Germany," he added.

GOING TO GIVE OUR ABSOLUTE BEST'

Moriyasu quickly added: "But no matter who our opponents are, we are going to give our absolute best performance that we can on the pitch. We have prepared well for all the tournament matches in which we seek to go far by achieving the

Moriyasu will rely on the brilliance of Takumi Minamino of Monaco and Schalke centre back Maya Yoshida when they take on Germany today knowing they have only met two times in friendly games. Morivasu also know he

has in his squad eight players who feature in the Bundesliga.

"We will look to present the best level against the German national team, which we know well. We have players in the Bundesliga, playing with or against the best players in the world, and I want them to be confident when they play in tomorrow's game," he said. "Germany have won the World Cup and that is our aim too - they are role models for us," Moriyasu said yesterday.

"We are learning from Germany but we also want to compete on the world stage with the qualities that Japan has. We have a lot of feelings towards Germany but we have to treat this game as if we are playing any other team and just do our best?

Captain Maya Yoshida - who is appearing in his third World Cup - vesterday echoed his coach's sentiments about Germany's firepower.

"We understand that they have good qualities - speed, pace and physical ability as well," said Yoshida.

"The key is we have to defend well. Probably less opportunity to attack, but we need to make counter-attacks," the former Southampton player added.

Yoshida urged Asian fans to cheer for Japan.

"Germany is so strong so we need some support," Yoshida

"We are representing Japan of course, but at the same time representing Asia. So hopefully many fans come to the stadium, not only Japanese but also the many Asian fans.

"We believe that we have a chance," he said yesterday.

Flick confirmed yesterday that Germany will miss Germany winger Leroy Sane who is

down with a knee injury. "It is extremely tough to have to play without Leroy because with his qualities he is a player who can turn a game around by himself," Flick said.

"Hopefully he can play on Sunday.

"The whole medical staff are working on it," he added.



Canada ready to showcase new level in Qatar

Reuters Doha

nen Canada take to the pitch in their World Cup match in 36 years today, a country enamoured with ice hockey will showcase how much its men's soccer has evolved since they crashed out of the 1986 tournament winless and

Canada has produced an Olympic gold medal-winning women's team, but the men's side lagged behind their peers until manager John Herdman took the reins in 2018.

For Bob Lenarduzzi, who represented Canada at the 1986 World Cup, Canada's current level has been achieved thanks to the launch of a professional league in North America.

"The biggest difference and what got the ball rolling was the Americans being awarded the World Cup in 1994," Lenarduzzi told Reuters. "One of the prerequisites was that a league needed

to be started. The advent of MLS (Major League Soccer) has given way more opportunities for play-

Lenarduzzi, who played for English side Reading as a young professional, said Canadian men no longer necessarily needed to seek opportunities in Europe to develop their skills. The proper infrastructure and expertise are now available in Canada.

Paul Dolan, a goalkeeper in the 1986 World Cup squad, said the globalisation of the sport through the broadcast of Premier League matches and FIFA video games was helping soccer to infiltrate Canadian sport culture.

"That has made world soccer visible in Canada," he told Reuters. "It's made it more aspirational for young kids to maybe play soccer instead of hockey."

Canada are in a tough group with second-ranked Belgium as well as 2018 World Cup finalists Croatia and Morocco, who were unbeaten in African qualifying.

Canada have qualified automatically as one of the hosts of the 2026 tournament and will



Canada's defender Cornelius Derek (second right) warms up with teammates during a practice session at Umm Salal SC training site ahead of the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group F match against Belgium. (AFP)

benefit from the expansion of the 32-nation tournament to 48.

DAVIES FIT FOR OPENER. **SAYS HERDMAN**

Alphonso Davies will be fully fit to face Belgium today as Canada prepare for their first World Cup game in 36 years, coach John Herdman confirmed yesterday.

Bayern Munich star Davies, Canada's most potent attacking weapon, has been struggling to regain full fitness after suffering a hamstring strain earlier this month. However Canada's English coach Herdman told reporters yesterday that the 22-yearold would line-up against the Red Devils in the two sides' Group F game at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium. "I don't think there was any doubt we'd be starting him," Herdman said at a prematch press conference when asked about Davies' fitness.

"But you've got to follow the medical advice. Our goal first and foremost was the safety of the players, and that's paramount. So we've had to manage that proc-

Meanwhile, Belgium coach Roberto Martinez yesterday said

his side have "huge respect" for Canada who will be playing their first World Cup game for 36 years when the teams meet

Martinez's side finished third in Russia four years ago and will be heavy favourites against Canada, playing at the finals for the first time since 1986, today.

Belgium faced a similar proposition in 2018 when they beat tournament debutants Panama 3-0 in their opening game with

three second-half goals. "We have huge respect for what Canada have achieved because when you finish top of the (qualifying) group ahead of national teams such as United States and Mexico, it's something with substance, it's not a coincidence," Martinez said.

"They look like a team, not just a group of players coming together to play for the national team. That's a very dangerous situation, when you're playing a team with nothing to lose. We saw that with Panama for 50 minutes, and we have to match that enthusiasm."

Belgium, ranked second in the world behind Brazil, played a warm-up friendly against Egypt last week in Kuwait but lost 2-1.

"The friendly was important for us and we took that game almost as a competitive training session," said Martinez.

"I think it was a very good starting point.

"It's good sometimes to feel like we're not there yet. It was a wake-up for us. Probably that defeat will speed up the process."

Belgium's record goalscorer Romelu Lukaku is set to miss their first two matches as he continues to recover from a ham-

Ronaldo to leave Manchester United with 'immediate effect'

AFP London

ristiano Ronaldo's controversial second spell at Manchester United is to end with "immediate effect", the Premier League giants announced yesterday.

The Portugal forward appeared to be on his way out of Old Trafford following last week's television interview with Piers Morgan on TalkTV in which he said he felt "betrayed" by the club and had no respect for new manager Erik ten Hag.

"Cristiano Ronaldo is to leave Manchester United by mutual agreement, with immediate effect," said a United statement. "The club thanks him for his

immense contribution across two spells at Old Trafford, scoring 145 goals in 346 appearances, and wishes him and his family well for the future.

"Everyone at Manchester United remains focused on continuing the team's progress under Erik ten Hag and working together to deliver success on the pitch." As well as criticising the Old Trafford hierarchy and Ten Hag, the 37-year-old Ronaldo, currently with the Portugal squad at the World Cup in Qatar, was scathing about the club's US owners.

Ronaldo said the Glazer family cared far more about the

money-making potential of United than results on the pitch.

He even turned on former teammates Gary Neville and Wayne Rooney, saying "they are not my friends" after recent criticism from the pair.

United were initially guarded after the interview first aired, saying they would consider their response "after the full facts have been established". But given the severity of his comments, there seemed no way Ronaldo could remain at Old Trafford under the current

The veteran, who recently scored the 700th goal of a club career embracing several teams, appeared to be angling for a



Cristiano Ronaldo

move in the pre-season transfer window after United failed to qualify for the 2022/23 Champions League. But leading Eng-

lish and European clubs opted against moving for a player who, for all his talent, is not the force he once was yet still commands a reported weekly pay packet at United of around £500,000 (\$593,000). The fivetime Ballon d'Or winner has, however reportedly held talks with Bayern Munich and been linked with an emotional return to Sporting Lisbon, where he came through the youth ranks.

REDUCED STATUS

Ronaldo has undoubtedly been angered by his reduced status at United, with the club no longer at the summit of English football.

In 2009 he left a United side

who were one of the top teams in Europe but the team he rejoined limped to a sixth-place finish in the Premier League despite his 24 goals in all competitions. Ronaldo made his name in his first spell at Old Trafford, developing from a prodigiously gifted teenager when he arrived in 2003 into one of the deadliest

He won his first Champions League trophy and first Ballon d'Or during a trophy-laden spell under Alex Ferguson.

attackers in world football.

He left United after six years for Real Madrid, where he became the club's greatest goalscorer, winning the Champions

League four more times. Ronaldo spent three years at Juventus from 2018 before a return to Manchester.

But he has been a peripheral figure this season in an improving side under Ten Hag and was recently disciplined for refusing to come on as a substitute.

Ronaldo, who has scored just three goals this season, had returned to the team in recent weeks and even captained the Red Devils in a 3-1 loss at Aston Villa, though he was not in the squad for United's final match before the World Cup break.

With a world-record 117 international goals he is captaining Portugal at his fifth World Cup. The Euro 2016 winners open their campaign in Qatar against Ghana tomorrow.

Pre___view

Croatia can't dwell on 2018 World Cup run, says Modric

'We also have some veteran players who have helped the young ones adjust. This is a new tournament and we have to look at it this way'

oatia captain Luka Modric savs his team must "put aside" the memo-2018 World Cup final ahead of their opening game against Morocco in Qatar.

Modric was named player of the tournament four years ago as Croatia reached the final for the first time before losing 4-2 to France in Moscow.

"Whatever we've through during the 2018 World Cup was an unforgettable experience but we need to put it aside and focus on what is ahead of us." Modric said vesterday.

"Many players from Russia are not here. We have new players, fresh blood and new energy.

"We also have some veteran players who have helped the young ones adjust. This is a new tournament and we have to look at it this way. We have to leave it all out on the pitch."

The Real Madrid midfielder, who won the 2018 Ballon d'Or, is playing at his fourth World Cup - which is being held outside its traditional European summer slot for the first time.

"We're full of energy, we're not exhausted, we're not at the end of the season," said Modric. "We'll see tomorrow (WednesWORLD CUP · Qa



Croatia's coach Zlatko Dalic and Croatia's midfielder Luka Modric (right) address a press conference at the Qatar National Convention Centre in Doha on the eve of their Qatar 2022 World Cup match against Morocco. (AFP)

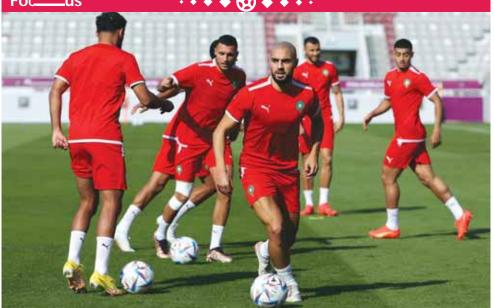
day) if the timing is a good thing or not." The 37-year-old Modric admitted to feeling "jittery" on the eve of his team's opening game against Morocco in Group F, which also includes Belgium and Canada.

Argentina's shock defeat by Saudi Arabia sent shockwaves through the tournament and Croatia will be on their guard

against a talented Morocco side. "We're quite cautious. What happened today makes us even more cautious," said coach Zlatko

"Today's results, with Saudi Arabia and Tunisia (who drew

0-0 with Denmark), mean that we have to be careful." "This World Cup is different to the one in Russia but we know our objectives," he added. "We know the pressure and expectations are great but we won't fall into that trap. We'll give our best. Will it be enough? We shall see."



Saudi win inspires Morocco on eve of clash with Croatia

Reuters

stunning upset of World Cup favourites Argentina, their coach Walid Regragui said as he backed his team to pull off a similar feat when they face Croatia in their first Group F match today.

The Saudis, the second-lowest ranked team at the World Cup and coached by former Morocco boss Herve Renard, beat Lionel Messi's Argentina 2-1 to deliver one of the biggest shocks in the tournament's history. Morocco are 10 places below 2018 World Cup runners-up Croatia in the world rankings and Regragui said his team were inspired by the way the Saudis had outplayed Argentina.

"What is the reality of football as we know it?" Regragui told a pre-match news conference. "I watched the Saudi Arabia game earlier - 31% possession and they had three shots on target, but they won against Argentina, against the best player in history. "If Croatia doesn't allow us to have full pos-

session tomorrow, OK, then we need to be very strong at the back. If they decide to give us that playing time, then we need to know exactly what we're doing with the ball when we have it." Renard helped rebuild the Moroccan national

team, taking them to the World Cup in Russia four years ago in their first appearance at the tournament since 1998.

Regragui congratulated Renard on the victory and said he aspired to follow in his footsteps. "This shakes things up on the international stage because football actually belongs to everyone," Regragui added.



Morocco's coach Walid Regragui (right) and defender Romain Ghanem Saiss arrive for a press conference at the Oatar National Convention Centre (QNCC) in Doha, yesterday.

"You do have FIFA rankings, but you should respect all football players, championships and leagues. "For a coach such as myself, I want to follow in his footsteps. I hope he's opened the door for us. He's shown us what we can do and I hope we'll be able to feel the same as Saudi Ara-

Morocco captain Romain Saiss said the Saudi win proved once again that anything was possible in football. "When you see the result (Saudi Arabia) were able to have against one of the favourites it gets your creative juices flowing," he added. "It whets our appetite."

"If you're able to put the ingredients into mix you can beat anyone. That's exactly what Renard has done. He's opened that door for us and it's up to us to follow in their footsteps tomorrow."

Cameroon superfan Embolo vows Swiss allegiance ahead of Cup opener

Switzerland's Breel Embolo (pictured) has divided loyalty when it comes to his native Cameroon and claims to be the country's biggest fan, but for 90 minutes at the World Cup this week, he'll have no doubts where his allegiance lies, Reuters reported.

The 25-year-old striker was born in Cameroon, Switzerland's opponents in their opening Group G match tomorrow, and savs he's confident his fierce pride and deep family ties with the African nation can be put on hold in Oatar.

"It's very special. It's my hometown and my mum and my dad come from there, my family, most of them come from there,



so it's a special game for me and my family," Embolo told reporters at the team's training ground.

"But most importantly it's a World Cup game...I'm proud and happy to be here and hopefully I will play against them (Cameroon) but most importantly is playing in a World Cup. It's

always special." Embolo was born in Cameroon's capital Yaounde and left for France age five with his mother before later relocating to Switzerland, where he became a citizen in 2014. He made his debut for the Swiss national team a year later and has since played close to 60 games, enjoying stints in the Bundesliga with Borussia Monchengladbach and in Ligue 1 with Monaco, where he has netted seven times in 15 matches this season. He is playing in his second World Cup. Asked if he was really Cameroon's number one fan, Embolo said "yes of course but after Switzerland, and after this game".

Dias says Portugal must focus on World Cup, not Ronaldo

ortugal defender Ruben Dias said yesterday it was time to focus on the World Cup and move on from the media circus surrounding Cristiano Ronaldo's explosive interview.

The Manchester City centre-back said despite the distraction, Ronaldo's comments had not dented the nation's bid to win the competition for the first time in their history. Ronaldo, who has been a peripheral figure for Manchester United this season, last week lashed out at the club and coach Erik ten Hag in an interview with

In the aftermath he appeared to share a frosty greeting with Portugal and United teammate Bruno Fernandes and was also pictured gripping Joao Cancelo by the head.

But Dias said it was time to move on. "I don't think Cristiano's affairs have put a dent whatsoever into what we are trying to achieve here, so I don't have much to say about it." Dias said.

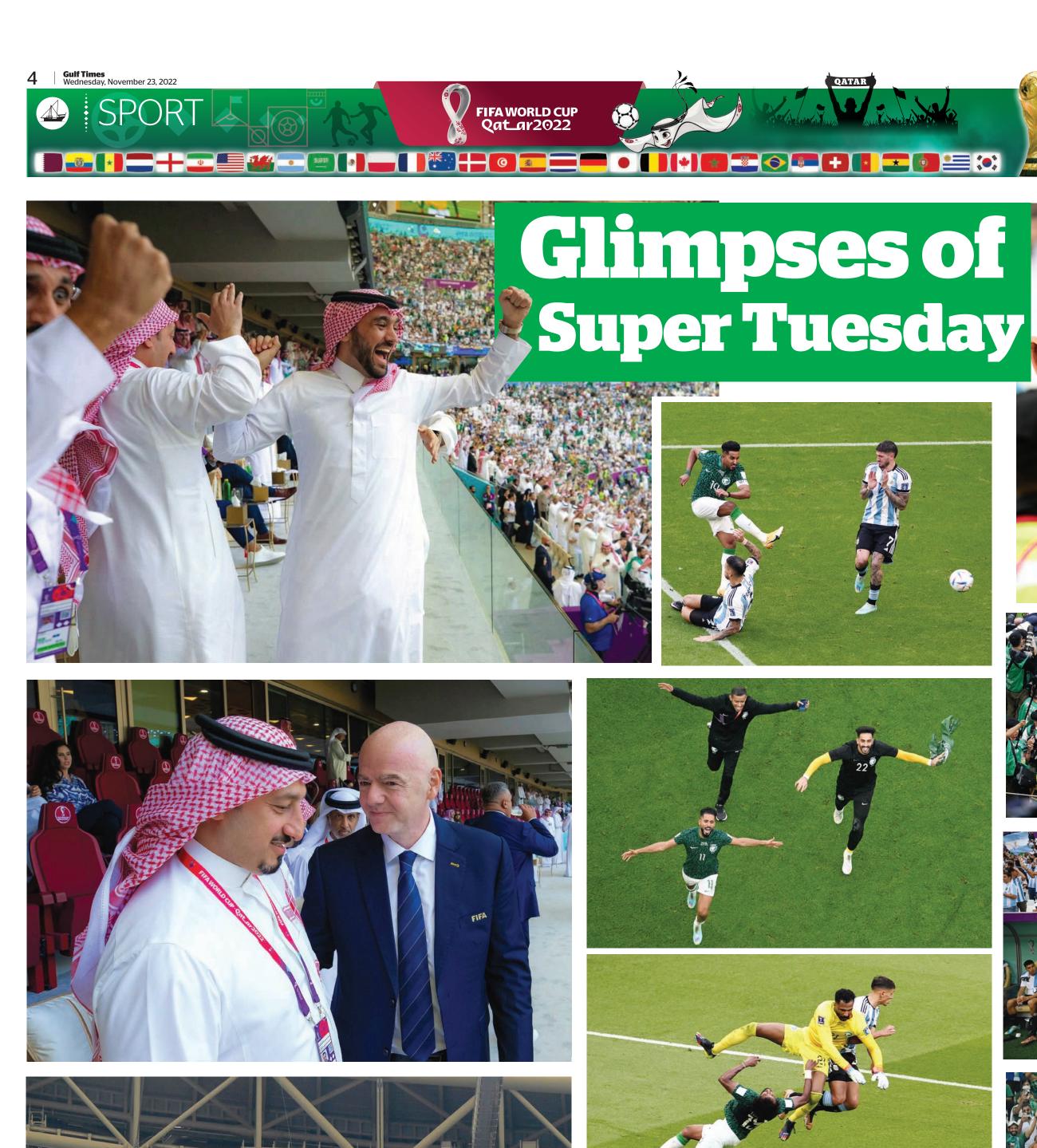
"I think we've talked about this enough, there's not much to add. As a team we will focus on the World Cup now and not other

Ronaldo, who has a world-record 117 in-

ternational goals in men's football, will captain the team at his fifth World Cup.

The superstar forward is unrepentant about his interview, which has caused such a furore, telling reporters: "I talk when I want to." Euro 2016 winners Portugal are among the fancied sides in Qatar but Dias refused to speculate on how far they could go. The defender preferred to focus on Portugal's first opponents, Ghana, whom they face tomorrow before playing Uruguay and South Korea.

"We're focused on winning against Ghana," said Dias. "The best way to win is focus on one game at a time and that's the best way to have a successful path ahead of us."





























'All about Bale again', says Wales coach Page

'Irrespective of what he does at club level, he manages to put the jersey on for Wales and does things that surprise people'

ales coach Rob Page said it was "all about (Gareth) Bale again" after he scored a late penalty to salvage a 1-1 draw against the United States at the World Cup on Monday.

Bale, Wales' all-time top scorer, crashed home an 82ndminute spot-kick to earn his side a point in their first World Cup game since 1958.

Asked if Bale was going to take the penalty he won after a foul by Walker Zimmerman, Page told ITV: "A million percent. He's never let us down. Once again it's all about Bale."

Bale was making his first start for club or country since late September, but Page had no doubts over his captain's ability to deliver on the biggest stage.

"Irrespective of what he does at club level, he manages to put the jersey on for Wales and does things that surprise people," said

Wales fell behind to Tim Weah's fine first-half strike and looked to be heading for defeat before Bale was brought down inside the area by defender Zimmerman.

"It's an amazing feeling to get off the mark personally, but we would much rather have had the three points," Bale told ITV.

"It was a great team performance, especially in the second half when we showed that real grit and determination to get back into the game.

'We are proud of that. We have things to build on and



Wales' forward Gareth Bale greets supporters at the end of the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group B football match against USA at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan, west of Doha on Monday.

things to work on." Wales face Iran on Friday before playing neighbours England in their final Group B match on November 29.

"We said coming in we didn't want to lose the first game. We didn't have to win it but it was important we didn't lose. It's a really important point for us," said Page. USA coach Gregg Berhalter said Bale's equaliser was a tough pill to swallow for his young side.

"Walking into the locker room after the game you can

see the collective disappointment. It didn't look like a team playing in their first World Cup," said Berhalter.

"In the end we got hurt by some direct play from Wales. I'm disappointed with the result but proud of the effort."

Berhalter had no qualms about the penalty but felt the ball had gone out earlier in the

"I'm sure the ball went out. I'm positive the ball went out by a good margin also. I'm surprised it wasn't called."

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'A bucket of ice water': Argentina cries after **World Cup defeat**

asps gave way to stony expressions of disbelief, and then tears, as Argentina fans gathered in Buenos Aires watched the humiliation of their football team unfold at the World Cup in Qatar, AFP reported from Buenos Aires. "It was a walloping, a bucket of ice-cold water," Carlos Cuera, 26, said of the 2-1 loss to Saudi Arabia.

He was still seated in front of a cafe television where fans decked out in their team's white-and-blue colours gathered from before 7:00am for the breakfast match in the Argentine capital.

"Nobody expected this. We thought the first three matches would be easy victories, and now it has become more complicated," he said, adding the loss had ramped up pressure ahead of Saturday's duel with Mexico.

It was one of the greatest upsets in World Cup history for Lionel Messi's Argentina side, ending a winning streak that included last year's Copa America cham-

pionship. The proud, football-crazed nation entered the World Cup among the favourites, eight years after they reached the final. But Buenos Aires quickly resumed its normal hustle and bustle as desolate fans headed to their offices. In central Corrientes Street. not far from the city's towering Obelisk, one cafe had set up a screen on the sidewalk. prompting deliverymen, taxis, and even bus drivers to slow as they passed hoping for another goal. Pilates instructor Lena Widgren, 50, said she had heard it would be "an easy game." But she had noticed that whenever Argentina is

faced with a tie or a loss in

a World Cup match, "their energy levels drop a bit, they lack fire.'

The day started better than it ended. Fans leaped from their chairs, screaming with joy, when Messi scored from the penalty spot in the 10th

"I feel very sad, really. The game started with such euphoria, with so much desire to win, and suddenly the game turned around." said Llanca Salvi, a 26-vearold plastic artist, who added that she did not know much about football. But it was about "the emotion of being Argentine, of going out to celebrate".

SECOND HALF OF 'TERROR'

Fans joined in with a cascade of insults when three first-half goals were cancelled for being offside, with VAR involved. Norberto Protzmann said he sat in "terror" during the second half. "We underestimated them a little too much and they dominated us in the second half," he

"The players were too confident, whereas the rival team put their lives into each move, because they knew they were facing a great team. And it worked well for

Gustavo Leal, 75, complained about the use of VAR, saying, "football with technology is no longer football".

"This World Cup needs (Diego) Maradona," he said, referring to the Argentine great who died in 2020. But he remained optimistic. "The first match is as hard as the last. I trust him," he said of coach Lionel Scaloni, adding he was a "measured guy who knows how to lead the team".



Leaders have been replaced and Belgium can win World Cup, says Vertonghen

Reuters

elgium are confident they can win the World Cup despite missing some of the key elements of their 2018 campaign, defender Jan Vertonghen said

Belgium finished third in Russia after coming close in a 1-0 defeat by eventual champions France but this time will not be able to rely on the likes of Vincent Kompany, who retired, or Marouane Fellaini, who does not play for his country anymore.

Vertonghen, however, believes the younger generation is ready. "I understand the selection

in 2018 was exceptional. I understand you may have some doubts now because a couple of these guys who where leaders are missing now," Vertonghen told a news conference on the eve of their Group F opener against

"But they have been replaced. A year or two ago, ok, I would maybe have agreed with you but now we have a strong midfield, a lot of options among the for-

"Now there is room for these young guys and I'm excited by what I see. I have faith in this squad."

While Romelu Lukaku will miss the first two games through injury, coach Roberto Martinez has closely watched the rapid

improvements of Lois Openda in Ligue 1 with RC Lens.

"I have 25 players who are fully fit for tomorrow - all of them apart from Lukaku," said Martinez asked about the condition of Eden Hazard. It has been a rapid switch from club football to national team duty and Vertonghen said it was not easy to

"It was a lot calmer there (in Russia) because we had a longer period to prepare and that's something I liked, to close the season with the club and have a couple of weeks to work with vour national team; here everything is evolving rapidly," he

"We're going to try to accomplish as much as possible and



Belgium's Spanish coach Roberto Martinez gives a press conference at the Oatar National Convention Centre (ONCC) in Doha, vesterday.

hopefully it means getting the trophy." Martinez said that being the favourites against Canada was a double-edged sword.

"Tomorrow we're not going

to play a World Cup, tomorrow we're going to play against Canada. They won't have any pressure and that's very dangerous in football," he said.

Added time at World Cup — added strain or added drama?

AFP

o not adjust your television sets: England and Iran really did play nearly half an hour of injury time in their World Cup game.

Belgium's Jan Vertonghen during the press conference yesterday.

And that was not the only match in Qatar to drag on well beyond the allotted 90 minutes. It is early days at this World Cup, but already a very noticeable trend has emerged: games are going on much, much longer than normal.

So what is going on? It is no accident.

Prior to the World Cup kicking off on Sunday, Pierluigi Collina, chairman of FIFA's referees committee, said fourth officials would be keeping a firm eve on time lost during games.

That could be due to injuries, substitutions, red or yellow cards, video assistant referee interventions and also some old-fashioned time-wasting from teams trying to hang on to a lead.

"In Russia (World Cup 2018), we tried to be more accurate in compensating for time lost during games and that's why you saw six, seven or even eight minutes added on," he told reporters at a pre-tournament briefing.

"Think about it: if you have three goals in a half, you'll probably lose four or five minutes in total to celebrations and the re-

For players and coaches already worried about the sheer amount of football squeezed into an already congested season, this can only be bad news.

England coach Gareth Southgate was delighted with many aspects of his side's 6-2 hammering of Iran on Monday, but noted the amount of stoppage time. Largely because of a nasty facial injury to Iran goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand, the first half dragged on for nearly an hour instead of 45 minutes.

Similarly, Mehdi Taremi's consolation penalty, nearly the last kick of the game, came in the 13th minute of stoppage

"We had, I think, 24 minutes of added time across the game," Southgate told the BBC, suggesting his players were drained and more susceptible to conceding a goal as the game ebbed



England's coach Gareth Southgate has suggested his players were drained and more susceptible to conceding a goal as the game ebbed deep into added time.

deep into added time.

"So it's a long time to focus, but we just lost concentration and when we play at a slower

tempo, we're nowhere near as effective."

According to statistics experts Opta, those elongated

halves in the England-Iran game, plus added time in the second half of the United States versus Wales (10 mins 34 secs) and second half of Senegal against the Netherlands (10:03), were the most stoppage time in the World Cup on record, going back to 1966.

All happened on Monday, the second day of the Qatar tournament, suggesting this is just the

Marc Wilmots, the former Belgium coach, said it was harmful to the players.

"What amazes me are the cramps, the injury problems and the players are already exhausted," he told broadcaster RTBF.

The coaches - or least those winning the match in question – also may not like it, but observers sick of players timewasting are applauding FIFA's hardline stance. "Enjoying the amount of time

that is being added on by the officials at the Qatar World Cup 2022, there is too much time wasting in football!" former England defender Jamie Carragher tweeted.

Former Chelsea and Tottenham defender Jason Cundy, who is now a broadcaster, told his radio show that he would not be happy if it was England hanging on for victory at the end.

But he added: "Does it give the viewer, as a neutral, it's like, 'Oh my god, something could change, there's 10 minutes of injury time, 10 minutes!'

"I think what it's doing is adding a little bit more jeopardy to the game."



No doubt I am Spain's leader, says Enrique 'I am delighted to be here, to debut as coach at a World Cup,

enjoy this party of football, have the last training session this afternoon and take on the first game with joy'

AFP

pain coach Luis Enrique insisted yesterday that he is the team's leader in the absence of any obvious star player, ahead of their first World Cup game against Costa

World Cup winner and captain Sergio Busquets tends to keep a low profile, while youngsters like Ansu Fati and Pedri could one day become stars in their own right but are still developing.

"The leader of the national team has to be the coach," Luis Enrique told a press conference the day before Spain open their campaign against Los Ticos.

"I have to say I am the leader because who will believe in what I tell them, if there is any doubt. "I decide who plays, when we

travel, how we play, I am a leader who gives solutions to the team. "I am delighted to be here, to debut as coach at a World Cup, enjoy this party of football, have

the last training session this afternoon and take on the first game Spain have the third youngest squad at the World Cup, with Luis Enrique leaning on younger

talents while some older players

like Sergio Ramos were left out

of the squad. "It's very positive because young players bring energy to the team, we try to manage that with the experience we have as staff," said Luis Enrique.



Spain coach Luis Enrique (also right) and his team during a training session yesterday. (Reuters)

Tough call

The coach admitted that the worst moment of the tournament so far came last week when he exercised that leadership, replacing Jose Gaya with Alejandro Balde, after the Valencia defender suffered a sprained ankle.

Asked about Spanish reports that Gaya's ankle had already healed and he would have been able to play in the tournament. Luis Enrique explained his choice.

"I take decisions, if I took them by the heart, with what I feel for Gaya and his professionalism, then he'd still be here,"

"I have to take them with my head. Two of the three games he would not have been 100 percent in, I was told it was an injury that would last 10-15 days. I had to take the best decision for the team and

"Imagine if I listened to what they wanted and then Jordi Alba got injured, and I had no full-back for the first game, imagine what you would say about me.

"I have to lead this team and choose the best for it."

Luis Enrique said his lack of cover at left-back also contributed to Gaya departing, whereas in other positions he could have waited for an injured player to heal.

Costa Rica coach Luis Fernando Suarez said he took a different approach to leader-

"I just help the leaders, I can facilitate them," he told a press conference later Tuesday.

"In my group I have different leaders. I can have a few of them so I can manage them. Bryan (Ruiz) is one, Keylor (Navas) is another, Joel Campbell is another.

"We have a different type of leadership. We have to be smart enough to know who the leaders are and help them."



Biggest player at World Cup is also big surprise

he biggest player at the World Cup has also emerged as one of the 2.03m (6.66 feet) tall Andries international debut for the Neth-

Veteran Dutch coach Louis van Gaal has penchant for springing a shock or two but picking the 28-year-old to keep goal in Monday's World Cup win over Senegal was one of his

veen goalkeeper, with a total of only 32 appearances in the Dutch topflight, did not put a foot wrong as he made a handa clean sheet in the 2-0 victory

It capped a remarkable rise for a player quick to admit: "This is also bizarre to me, even a few weeks ago, I wouldn't have

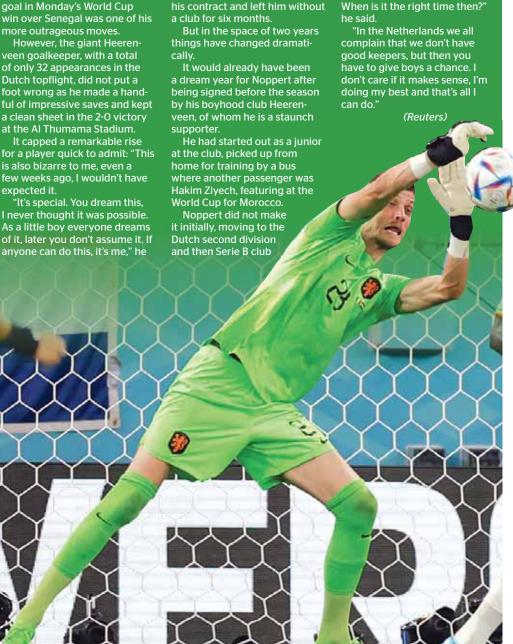
"It's special. You dream this, l never thought it was possible. As a little boy everyone dreams of it, later you don't assume it. If told Dutch NOS television.

Van Gaal was pleased too. "Not a bad choice," he crowed 'I picked him because he is the

Only two years ago, Noppert's parents were advising him to quit the game and his girlfriend suggested signing up with the police after a meniscus injury saw FC Dordrecht fail to extend his contract and left him without

Foggia, where he played only eight games. At Go Ahead Eagles last has not looked back, his rapid

"Louis van Gaal told me that I had to play like I do at my club, but in a different guise. I just have to stop balls. Does it make sense that I started the game?



Spain's Nico Williams hoping for sibling showdown at World Cup

pain winger Nico Williams wants to take his sibling rivalry with older brother, Ghana striker Inaki Williams, from local parks to the biggest stage of all.

Teammates at Athletic Bilbao, the pair are extremely close, but Nico, 20, is hoping their paths can cross at the World Cup in Qatar.

They both managed to score in the same Athletic match for the first time in September and could potentially meet as foes from the quarter-final stage.

The Williams brothers would be only the second set of siblings to face each other at a World Cup after Jerome and Kevin-Prince Boateng did in 2010 and 2014 for Germany and Ghana respectively.

"Above all I'd like to face Ghana," Nico told AFP in an interview at Spain's Doha training base, the University of Oatar. "It's that sibling rivalry, we always had a bit of needle in the parks when

we were little, and I hope we can do it

as professionals." A deep bond endures between the brothers, whose parents endured a nightmarish 4,000km journey from Ghana to Melilla, a Spanish enclave in north Af-

The route was partly barefoot across baking Sahara terrain, a risk they deemed worth taking to seek a better life.

Maria Williams, their mother, was pregnant with Inaki at the time and, after her and father Felix Williams were granted asylum in Bilbao, he was born there in 1994.

It's where he has remained, along with Nico who arrived eight years later, with the younger Williams brother exploding this year in the Spanish top flight. Inaki, capped by Spain

in a friendly, declared his international allegiance for Ghana in July, and Nico earned his first cap under coach Luis Enrique in September.



World Cup nod after making a crucial assist against Portugal to help Spain reach the Nations League final four. Fearsome on the right flank for his club,

Nico credits his brother helping him find his footing at football's top level. "Always,"

said

when asked if Inaki gave him advice. "An older brother has to, and I'm very

Nico,

happy with his advice, I enjoy playing more because of it." In the absence

of Inaki, Nico says it is Barcelona lynchpin Sergio Busquets who helps him with Spain, as well as other veterans like Cesar Azpilicueta and Dani Carvajal.

Nico believes Inaki deciding to go his own way and play for Ghana was "a respectable decision" but he was always determined to play for Spain, even if it happened quicker than he could have imagined.

"I always knew that I wanted to be here, to be part of the Spanish national team,"

"It caught me out a bit, the call from Luis Enrique, I'm a very young kid, things have moved quickly and I didn't expect it."

Given Inaki's only Spain appearance came in 2016, and Nico is just starting his professional career, until recently it seemed unlikely either would feature at this World Cup, let alone both. "The truth is that we could never have

imagined that we would reach this level, two brothers playing for the same club, each one in a national team and at a World Cup," said

"In life this situation happens rarely, and my family is very happy and proud that we

"Seeing the suffering of my parents, what they have gone through, it makes you think about things more, you don't have this mentality that maybe a 20-year-old has.

"They have given everything for us, my brother and I, suffered a lot for us, above all for me, (Inaki) had it a bit worse than me.

"My brother is protective of me, he wants to help me, and because of that I am the person that I am today."

Spain's Nico Williams during a training session at the Qatar University in Doha yesterday. (Reuters)

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Poland's Lewandowski misses penalty in Mexico stalemate

'I didn't score, that sure hurts. It's a penalty, a lottery, you can't explain it'

AFP Doha

obert Lewandowski suffered fresh World Cup misery as the Poland striker's penalty was saved in a 0-0 draw against Mexico yesterday. Lewandowski has never scored at a World Cup and the Barcelona striker had admitted it would be a "huge dream" to finally get off the mark on the global stage.

Instead, the 34-year-old's dream turned into a bit of a nightmare when he won a second-half penalty, only for goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa to keep out his tame effort. "I didn't score, that sure hurts," Polish media quoted him as saying. "It's a penalty, a lottery, you can't explain it."

Lewandowski, Poland's record scorer with 76 goals, has netted 18 times in 19 appearances for Barcelona, the club he joined in the close season after bagging 344 goals in eight trophy-filled years at Bayern Munich. Yet the World Cup has proved barren for Lewandowski, with this latest goalless outing coming after he failed to score in Poland's three games when they bowed out in the group stage four years ago.

Saudi Arabia's stunning 2-1 win over Argentina earlier yesterday had blown open the race to progress to the last 16 from Group C. But this was a frustrating draw for both teams, with Lewandowski wasting the best chance of a cagey game and Mexico ruing their failure to turn territorial dominance

into goals. "When Robert misses there is always the question why. He will answer that best. Yesterday he trained and he never missed with his penalties," Poland boss Czeslaw Michniewicz said. "Other



Mexico's goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa stops a penalty kick by Poland's forward Robert Lewandowski during the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 Group C match at the Stadium 974 in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

great players have missed penalties. It's a pity. I know how much he wanted to score at a World Cup. I sympathise with him. He was very emotional about it. I hope there will be other opportunities for him. We know he will help us a lot in this tournament."

The Stadium 974 – whose structure was partially created from a colourful tapestry of shipping containers overlooks Doha's port and the area was transformed into a colourful fiesta as green-clad, sombrero-wearing Mexicans partied ahead of evening kick-off.

It was an even more vibrant scene inside the stadium, with the estimated 40,000 capacity almost entirely filled with vociferous, flag-waving fans of

As the main threat to their team's hopes, Lewandowski was immediately

Ochoa saves day again for Mexico

Doha: Mexico fans and players would have only wanted one man standing between their goal and Robert Lewandowski's impending penalty - and cult hero Guillermo Ochoa duly did the business. The 37-year-old goalkeeper, called up for his fifth World Cup, turned the Polish striker's effort away to earn Mexico a point in their

goalless World Cup clash yesterday. The curly haired Ochoa appeared to say something to Lewandowski in the run-up to the spot-kick and it might have distracted the usually deadly striker, whose effort was tame.

"Memo' (his nickname) is a goalkeeper with a lot of history, five World Cups - you can say that easily - but behind it is a lot of sacrifice, a lot of work and that is reflected in a moment in a crucial game," said Mexico forward Alexis Vega.

Club America stopper Ochoa made brilliant saves against hosts Brazil

subjected to ear-splitting jeers from the Mexico supporters. He tried to silence the din with an early header but his effort deflected harmlessly wide. With Poland curiously content to sit back for long periods and Mexico's energy levels almost matching their raucous fans, it was Gerardo Martino's side who carried the greater threat.

Alexis Vega looped his header inches past the far post from Hector Herrera's cross. Mexico followed that close shave with another incisive move that ended with Jesus Gallardo's shot being palmed away by Wojciech Szczesny. Isolated by Poland's conservative tactics, Lewandowski mustered just one touch in the Mexico area and completed only three passes in the first half.

Lewandowski couldn't be contained forever and his tenacity earned the in the 2014 tournament to make his name on the international stage. He described the 0-0 draw as the "match of my life".

Ochoa also kept a clean sheet in a 1-0 win over Germany at the 2018 World Cup, putting in another outstanding performance with a string of saves. Although the Poland match won't be remembered for long, it was another impressive contribution from Ochoa at the World Cup.

The Guadalajara-born goalkeeper has played in France with Ajaccio and Spain for Malaga and Granada, but he is largely known for his heroics in this competition. "He was the hero, if he had not saved the penalty we'd have gone one down. 'Memo' always appears when you need him to," said defender Jorge Sanchez.

"The save was a real boost in that moment, we know what a great stopper he is, what a great leader he is."

57th-minute penalty when he barged into the Mexico area, forcing a crude challenge from Hector Moreno that was ruled a spot-kick after VAR intervened. But Lewandowski's World Cup woe wasn't over as the 37-year-old Ochoa plunged to his left to make a fine save, leaving the striker holding his head in

It was Lewandowski's second successive penalty miss after he failed to score for Barcelona against Almeria earlier this month.

Henry Martin's glancing header drew a good stop from Szczesny as Mexico tried in vain to make the most of their escape. "We should have won the game, but we needed to be more accurate, said coach Martino. "We have a 'final' ahead of us in the next game against Argentina."

Feisty Tunisia hold Denmark



Doha

unisia held Denmark to a goalless draw in their World Cup opener yesterday, kicking off their Group D campaign with a strong performance against one of the pre-tournament dark horses. Tunisia have never reached the World Cup knockouts in five previous attempts but Jalel Kadri's side will be encouraged both with a point at Education City Stadium and with how they performed against the fancied Danes.

Since Kadri took charge of the team in January, Tunisia have only lost to Brazil and they frustrated Denmark in front of thousands of noisy North Africans.

Christian Eriksen was largely anonymous on his return to major tournament football after nearly dying on the pitch at the European Championship last year, wilting in the face of ferocious defending. Eriksen was the target of a big tackle in the second minute from Aissa Laidouni,

who then lept to his feet and egged on the fans to make even more noise and setting the tone for hard battle. "This is the World Cup. This is not a small competition, it's the most important competition in the world," Laidouni told reporters.

"I think it's important to come on the pitch and show determination, also with the fans we have here in Qatar. It (their support) is amazing and it's also important to show them that we are so determined."

Denmark had come into the match as favourites but Tunisia tore into their more illustrious opponents from kick-off, flying into tackles. The massed ranks of Tunisians in the stands created a crackling atmosphere and cheered every tackle and clearance.

The African side nearly took the lead in the 11th minute, with Mohamed Drager's long-range effort clipping off Andreas Christensen and drifting just wide.

The Danes began to get a foothold in the game but talisman Eriksen struggled to shake off the attentions of Tunisia's wellorganised backline, and although they got into dangerous positions any attacks were comfortably snuffed out.

The Tunisians came closest to taking the lead in the opening period, Copenhagenborn Anis Ben Slimane straying offside before slotting past Kasper Schmeichel, who then made sure the scores were level at the break with a wonderful stop. Issam Jebali managed to break through onto Youssef Msakni's smart pass but his dinked finish was brilliantly tipped away by the onrush-

Tunisia kept up the intensity but it was Denmark who had the two best chances of a tight second half. Eriksen was denied what would have been a fine goal by Aymen Dahmen's fingertip save in the 69th minute and from the subsequent corner, substitute Andreas Cornelius somehow headed onto the post from close range.

That would have probably won the match for Denmark as Tunisia failed to match their physical efforts with much real creativity.

After surviving a late penalty scare the north Africans celebrated a precious and unexpected point with their passionate

Giroud equals Henry mark as holders France sink Australia

Doha

livier Giroud joined Thierry Henry as France's all-time leading goalscorer with a brace as holders France recovered to beat Australia 4-1 and get their defence of the World Cup off to a winning start Tuesday.

Australia took a shock lead at Al Janoub Stadium with the game just nine minutes old when Craig Goodwin scored. France, whose build-up to the tournament was marred by injuries, saw left-back Lucas Hernandez come off hurt in the move that led to that goal. However, they recovered to equalise through Adrien Rabiot before Giroud put them ahead with an easy finish in the 32nd minute for his 50th international goal.

Kylian Mbappe got his name on the scoresheet in the second half and Giroud sealed the win to equal Henry's record tally of 51 goals for France. The win leaves them top of Group D after rivals Denmark and Tunisia drew 0-0 in Doha earlier.

At the age of 36, veteran AC Milan striker Giroud, who has 115 caps, is the oldest player to score for France at a World Cup. Yet he almost certainly would not have been playing here had

Karim Benzema been fit. Instead, the withdrawal of the Ballon d'Or winner with a thigh injury on the eve of the tournament has played into the hands of Giroud, who was a key player for coach Didier Deschamps in France's triumphant 2018 World Cup campaign but didn't score in Russia. It is not just Benzema who is missing for Les Bleus, with Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kante - their starting midfield

the tournament. Centre-back Raphael Varane was not risked having not played since suffering a leg injury playing for Manchester United a month ago. That meant Dayot Upamecano and Ibrahima Konate with nine caps between them - played together in central defence while Rabiot joined Aurelien Tchouameni in midfield.

duo four years ago - also out of

Australia stunned the world champions by scoring an early opener. Mathew Leckie controlled the ball on the right and escaped Lucas Hernandez before delivering a low ball across the face of goal for Goodwin to finish into the roof of the net.

Hernandez hurt his right knee trying to stop Leckie, although there did not appear to be any contact between the players.

The Bayern Munich defender was helped off, with his brother Theo coming on. The younger Hernandez did

not have the best introduction, giving the ball away and allowing Mitch Duke to hit a shot from range that flew just wide. Yet he played a part in the

27th-minute equaliser - Anto-

ine Griezmann's right-wing cor-

ner was cleared but the ball came to Hernandez on the left and his cross was headed in by Rabiot. Five minutes later Rabiot was involved again as France went ahead, hounding Nathaniel Atkinson out of possession on the French left and playing a one-

two with Mbappe before teeing

up Giroud. A Jackson Irvine header that hit the post in first-half stoppage time was a reminder that Australia could still threaten, but France ran away with the game

after the break. Griezmann had a shot cleared off the line just before Mbappe made it 3-1 midway through the second half, as he headed in off a post from Ousmane Dembele's



France's forward Olivier Giroud celebrates with teammates after scoring against Australia during the Group D match at the Al Janoub Stadium in Al Wakra yesterday. (AFP)