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FIFA WORLD CUP
Qatar 2022







Pre__view

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
Doha

Four-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 32-team tournament being held for the first time in the region.

Japan, on the other hand, have never gone beyond the 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 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 Low-coached Germany go out in the first round at Russia 2018, will have the services of experienced players in Thomas Müller and Manuel Neuer. Muller and Neuer are appearing in their fourth World Cup.



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



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

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 best results."

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. Moriyasu 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 - yesterday 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 said.

"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.



Japan players during training at Al Sadd SC New Training Facility 1 in Doha yesterday. (Reuters)



Germany's Manuel Neuer during training at Al Shamal Stadium yesterday. Former World Cup champions Germany take on three-time Asian champions Japan in their FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 match today. (Reuters)

Spot__light

Canada ready to showcase new level in Qatar

Reuters
Doha

When Canada take to the pitch in their first 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 goalless.

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 players to 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-year-old 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 pre-match 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 process."

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 in Qatar.

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."

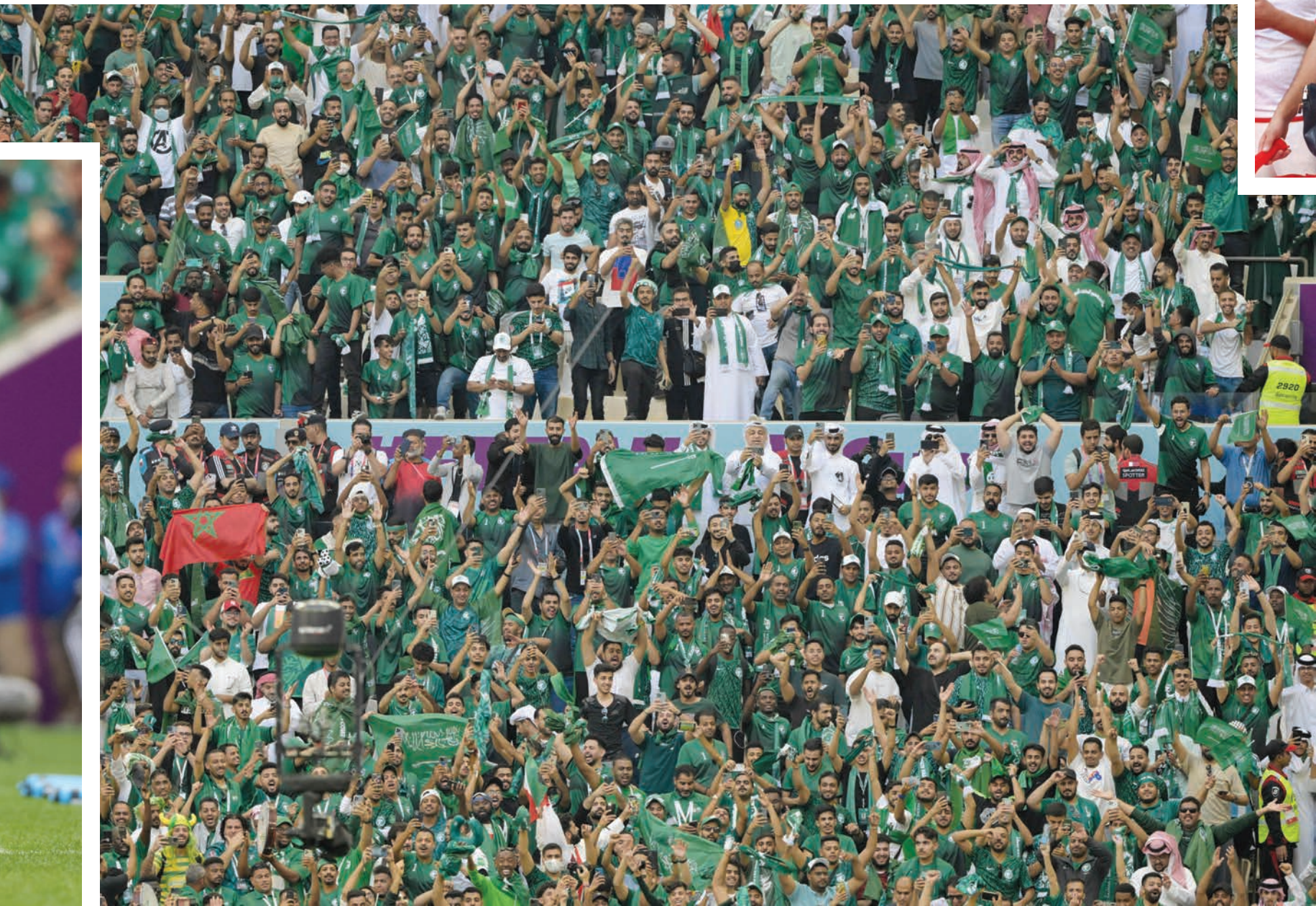
"It's good sometimes to feel like we're not there yet. It was a wake-up for us. Probably that defeat will speed up the process."

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



Glimpses of Super Tuesday







Focus

‘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’

AFP
Doha

Wales 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 82nd-minute 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 Page.

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 move.

“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.”

‘A bucket of ice water’: Argentina cries after World Cup defeat

Gasps 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 championship.

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 minute.

“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-year-old 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 said.

“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 them.”

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”.



Belgium’s Jan Vertonghen during the press conference yesterday.

Spotlight

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

Reuters
Doha

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

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 were leaders are missing now,” Vertonghen told a news conference on the eve of their Group F opener against Canada.

“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 forwards.

“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 adjust.

“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 your national team; here everything is evolving rapidly,” he said.

“We’re going to try to accomplish as much as possible and



Belgium’s Spanish coach Roberto Martinez gives a press conference at the Qatar National Convention Centre (QNCC) in Doha, yesterday.

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
Doha

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

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 eye 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 restart.”

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 time.

“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 start.

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 time-wasting 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.”



Match__report

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

Robert 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 ruining 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 "El Tri".

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

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."

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

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 despair.

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."

Foc__us

Feisty Tunisia hold Denmark



Tunisia's Ali Abdi (left) and Denmark's Christian Eriksen vie for the ball during the Group D match at the Education City Stadium in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

AFP
Doha

Tunisia 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 leapt 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 well-organised 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, Copenhagen-born 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 onrushing Schmeichel.

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 supporters.

Spot__light

Giroud equals Henry mark as holders France sink Australia

AFP
Doha

Olivier 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 duo four years ago - also out of 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.

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 - Antoine Griezmann's right-wing corner 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 cross.



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)