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Koulibaly sends Senegal into Round of 16, breaks Ecuador hearts

'I AM IN PAIN OVER THIS DEFEAT. WE ALL ARE. IT IS A HARD BLOW'

By Sahan Bidappa
Doha

Ecuador, who had been so impressive in their first two matches, were dealt a harsh reality by Senegal yesterday. The South Americans had cruised past Qatar in the tournament opener, when the hosts suffered a stage fright, and then came mighty close to upset the Netherlands in the next game, with Gonzalo Plata hitting the post.

If that had gone in, then Ecuador would have reached the last 16 – equalling their previous best finish from 2006 – with a game to spare against Senegal.

But as it turned out, the African champions made Ecuador pay for a lifeless first-half display to enter the last 16 of the Qatar World Cup for the first time in 20 years at the Khalifa International Stadium yesterday.

Senegal will take on England in the knockouts and even without their talisman Sadio Mane and Idrissa Gueye, they are going to be a tough opponent for the European heavyweights. A draw would have ensured Ecuador's passage into knockouts, but an insipid and nervous start to their final Group A game gave Senegal the momentum and the latter never looked back.

Ismaila Sarr's penalty, which he won after being ploughed into by defender Piero Hincapie, had put Senegal in front at the end of first half, before Ecuador recovered somewhat in the second half as Moises Caicedo found the equaliser in the 67th minute.

However, Ecuador's celebration was short-lived as two minutes and 30 seconds later Senegal captain Kalidou Koulibaly slotted home after a corner came off Hincapie, who had a forgettable outing.

Koulibaly's strike was a hammer blow to Ecuador's hopes even as Senegal players, backed by the non-stop drumming and dancing of their passionate fans, celebrated wildly. At the final whistle, the Ecuador players dropped to their knees and were inconsolable later. "I am in pain over this defeat. We all are," Ecuador coach Gustavo Alfaro said.

"It is a hard blow. It is a big frustration that we are feeling. We knew that details could make all the difference and unfortunately that's what happened in this match."

An emotional Koulibaly, meanwhile, dedicated his goal to late Senegal great Papa Bouba Diop and said he would give his man of the match trophy from yesterday's game to the deceased's family.

The defender also paid tribute to Senegal's 2002 World Cup hero by having Diop's number 19 written on his captain's armband. Diop scored the winning goal in the stunning 1-0 triumph over France in the opening game of that tournament 20 years ago, helping Senegal reach the quarter-finals. "Today is the anniversary of his death, I will give his family the trophy in his honour," Koulibaly said.

"We knew the anniversary of his death was something very important, for his family. We wanted to pay homage to him, he made me dream when I was a boy. Now we know we need to rest up, keep a cool head, yes we've qualified, and yes we can savour the win, but now we need to concentrate. We need to show why we are the champions of Africa. We need to rest up and get the best from ourselves in the knockout stages," the defender, who plays for Chelsea in the Premier League, said.

Match Stats

SENEGAL	2 - 1	ECUADOR
14	Shots	9
3	Shots on Target	4
7	Chances Created	7
6	Corners	3
3	Saves	1
3.9%	Possession	61.1%
3	Offsides	0
11	Fouls	23
1	Yellow Cards	0
0	Red Cards	0



Senegal's Kalidou Koulibaly (left) celebrates scoring their second goal against Ecuador with teammates at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha yesterday. *(Reuters)*



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Match Report

Netherlands into last 16 as Qatar's WC journey ends

CODY GAKPO AND FRENKIE DE JONG SCORED THE GOALS THAT ENSURED LOUIS VAN GAAL'S SIDE TOPPED GROUP A

By Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

A week ago popular coach Louis van Gaal boldly announced that his Dutch side had arrived in Qatar seeking their first FIFA World Cup title win. The 71-year-old veteran coach yesterday saw his side add credence to that claim when Netherlands handed Qatar their third successive defeat with a clinical 2-0 victory at Al Bayt Stadium.

For Netherlands, the 2010 FIFA World Cup runners-up, it was their second win in three matches after PSV Eindhoven striker Cody Gakpo opened the scoring in the 26th minute while Frenkie de Jong found the net in the 49th in front of 66,784 fans.

For Qatar, after having lost to Ecuador and Senegal earlier in the week, it was a chance to end their World Cup journey with an upset win against the 8th ranked side in the world. The Netherlands, tutored by Van Gaal, made sure that it wouldn't happen for the hosts.

In the first half hour the Dutch dominated play but Qatar – trailing by a goal – picked up short momentum in the last 15 minutes before the break.

Thereafter the hosts played catch-up for most part of what was entertaining match from the men in orange.

Just four minutes into the first half, captain Virgil van Dijk found Barcelona forward Memphis Depay with a slick long ball to the left of the Qatar box. Depay was tad slow to position himself as the ball bounced away without causing any damage. Qatar captain Hassan al-Haydos, playing his 171th game, produced a counterattack but his shot from outside the Dutch box was pouched by keeper Andries Noppert.

Moments later, Daley Blind tried to shoot the ball into the net from close range – following a goalmouth melee – but his feeble shot was punched away by Meshaal Barsham, younger sibling of global track and field icon Mutaz Barshim.

Shortly afterwards a stoppage in play took place when Qatar's Ismael Mohamed felt the force of a head butt against Dutchman Nathan Ake. In another stoppage, Davy Klassen rammed his head into Homam Ahmed inside the Qatar box.

Al-Haydos and Akram Afif were seen playing at the back as fear of attacks by the Dutch mounted in the first 12 minutes. Barsham, the young Qatari keeper, was alert to a deflection from his own defender as he dived to his right to collect the ball.

Depay, who was inside the Qatari box, sent a volley above the crossbar in the 13th minute as FIFA president Gianni Infantino watched from the stands.

The Dutch – with their relentless attacks – forced a corner after al-Haydos cleared a ball from Denzel Dumfries but the flag kick was wasted much to the delight of Qatari fans.

In the 20th minute, Afif swivelled past a couple of Dutch defenders but his cross from the edge of the box had no takers on the far side. Jurrien Timber blocked a shot from Homam to allow Qatar the first corner in the 24th minute. Another corner followed moments later but Al Sadd defender Abdelkarim Hassan was wayward with his deflection from inside the box. Afif, in another solo run on the flank, found Homam with a cross that seemed to have too much pace. Gakpo, seconds later, added his third goal of the tournament in the 26th minute.

After a short dribble near the Qatari box where he was chased by Assim Madibo, Gakpo – following a neat cross from Klassen – quickly positioned himself and unleashed a powerful right-footed drive that sailed past the outstretched hands of Barsham.

Ismail Mohamed and al-Haydos tried to sandwich Gakpo who exhibited incredible speed and accuracy on his shot for his side's first goal. Soon after the half-hour mark, Qatar tried to build momentum with a couple of threatening moves but the forwards lacked coordination up front. In the 34th minute, defender Hassan broke free of his marker on the left flank but his cross had no takers with Dutch captain van Dijk easily clearing up the move inside his own box.

In another similar attack, striker Almoez Ali slipped in a neat cross for al-Haydos inside the Dutch box but the Qatari captain was slow to react before he lost the ball.

Marten de Roon found Gakpo with a cross on the edge of the Qatar box in the 40th minute. Gakpo once again found pace on his shot but there was too much elevation on the flight that sent the ball sailing above the Qatar crossbar. From the corner of his eye, a disappointed Gakpo realised the move was declared offside by the linesman.

To summarise Qatar's performance in the first half was the miss from Afif after a neat cross from Hassan close to the halfline. Shockingly Afif had no leg power to keep the ball in play.

On the final touch of the first half, Deepay launched a fierce drive that picked up late swing and sailed past the goalpost to the right of keeper Barsham.

Netherlands doubled the lead in the 49th minute when Barcelona midfielder De Jong scored from close range. Qatar keeper Barsham had saved a brilliant shot from Deepay but De Jong wasted little time to find the net.

Four minutes from the first hour mark, Qatar suffered another hit-and-miss when Hassan delivered a neat cross into the Dutch six yards where there was no home player to keep the ball in play.

A few minutes later, defender Pedro Miguel delivered a near-perfect cross from the left flank but once again the ball sailed away with no Qatari striker in position for a deflection.

With lack of finishing in the front, coach Felix Sanchez made three substitutions that included captain al-Haydos called back. Van Gaal, on the other hand, rolled back Deepay and Memphis to cool the star players for the next round.

In the 67th minute, Steven Berghuis and Vincent Janssen combined to score their side's third goal. Berghuis' easy shot into an empty net from close range was cancelled after a VAR decision showed Gakpo had handled the ball in the build-up.

In the 80th minute, keeper Noppert made a save near his own goalpost before Mohamed Muntari could initiate a move. In injury time, Berguis hit the Qatar crossbar.

As van Gaal looked towards the Round of 16, Qatar coach Sanchez was seen looking for his accreditation after the final whistle.

We didn't plan to reach the last 16: Sanchez

Qatar coach Felix Sanchez said yesterday his team were never targeting a place in the knockout phase after defeat by the Netherlands left the hosts without a point in the World Cup.

The home side finished rock bottom of Group A after a 2-0 loss at the Al Bayt Stadium, having already joined South Africa in 2010 as the only hosts to be dumped out at the first hurdle.

"We're a country with 6,000 football licences so this was a likely situation," said Sanchez when asked if he ever thought Qatar would get through the group.

"We never thought at any time to set a target of reaching the last 16 or the quarter-finals.

"We just wanted to come here and see what we could do. We managed to play two good games against Senegal and the Netherlands. The first game (against Ecuador) we weren't at our usual level and we know that.

"You can use statistics how you want but we need to make our own assessments."

Qatar came into the tournament as continental champions after winning the 2019 Asian Cup, but never seriously threatened to pull off any surprise results. Sanchez, who has been in charge since 2017, said he would wait to decide whether or not to stay on as coach.

"I'm not sure about my future to be honest... We just have to reflect on this. We haven't thought anything in particular abut the future."

The win sent the Dutch through as group winners, along with Senegal. *(AFP)*



Qatar players applaud the fans after the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group A match against the Netherlands at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor, north of Doha, yesterday. *(AFP)*



Netherlands' Cody Gakpo celebrates scoring a goal against Qatar during the World Cup Group A match at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor, north of Doha, yesterday. *(AFP)*

Preview

Beating France? Nothing is impossible: Tunisia coach

Reuters
Al Rayyan

Nothing is impossible, Tunisia coach Jalel Kadri said yesterday as he looked ahead to a Group D showdown with France that could determine if his team reaches the World Cup knockout stage for the first time in six attempts. But at a World Cup that has been littered with upsets, is it Mission Impossible that Tunisia could upset the reigning champions? Certainly not.

Mission Improbable. Yes.

Parked at the bottom of the group and yet to score a goal the one certain thing is that the Carthage Eagles face a monumental challenge at Education City Stadium today when they take on in-form Les Bleus.

"The message I convey to our players is nothing is impossible, we are still alive, we are still motivated and we will ready for this last battle," Kadri told reporters. "We still have high hopes.

"I believe in the players and hopefully we will be lucky and move onto the next phase."

Tunisia might hope that France having secured their place in the last 16 might ease up but coach Didier Deschamps promised his men will not take the Tunisia threat lightly.

"The team who will play tomorrow will do everything to get the best possible result, even if I have this possibility to shuffle things around," Deschamps told a news conference yesterday.



Tunisia coach Jalel Kadri with his players during a training session at Al Egla training site yesterday. *(Reuters)*

Tunisia grabbed what had seemed an unlikely point in their opener battling Denmark to a scoreless draw which was followed by a shutout 1-0 loss to Australia. Finding the back of the net has not been a problem for France, who took down the Socceroos 4-1 and locked up a place in the knockout round with a 2-1 win over Denmark.

A win might also convince Kadri to stay on as coach having hinted that he would resign if his men fail to advance. "Let's wait for the result for the match and we will see later," said Kadri. "We are people who bare responsibility and hopefully I will able to answer your question after the match."

Deschamps refuses to discuss holidaying Benzema

France coach Didier Deschamps refused to discuss Karim Benzema after the injured Ballon d'Or winner was spotted arriving on holiday on the Indian Ocean island of Reunion following his withdrawal from the World Cup.

The Real Madrid striker pulled out of the France squad with an injured left thigh on the eve of the tournament and departed their team hotel in Qatar soon afterwards. He arrived on Reunion, a French overseas department, early yesterday morning following rumours in Spain that he might return to training with his club. Sources close to Benzema said the player would stay on the island for a week.

Asked about Benzema, who is still officially part of the France squad at the World Cup having not been replaced, Deschamps dismissed the question.

"You are fishing for things there, but these things are not on my mind. I don't know who is saying what, where or how," the France coach said at a press conference in Doha ahead of today's final group game against Tunisia. "I spoke to Karim after his departure, and you know what his situation is and how long he will be out for.

"I am focusing on the 24 players who are here. I'll let you talk about that and debate it if you want, but I am not going to talk about things that don't affect what we are doing here from day to day."

The French Football Federation said Benzema would be sidelined for three weeks after he picked up the injury, technically meaning he could be fit to return for the end of the World Cup should France go that far.

France have won both Group D games so far at the tournament against Australia and Denmark and a draw against Tunisia today will guarantee that they progress to the last 16 as winners of their section. Even a defeat will suffice so long as Australia do not beat Denmark and manage to overturn France's advantage on goal difference, which is currently superior by six. Tunisia have to win the game at Education City Stadium to have a chance of advancing.

Fact Box

FRANCE vs TUNISIA

When: Today, 6pm
Where: Education City Stadium, Al Rayyan
Capacity: 44,667

Key stats:

- France were the first country to qualify for the knockout stages after Saturday's victory over Denmark saw them post a second Group D win. They began the defence of their 2018 crown with a 4-1 victory over Australia.
- After a draw with Denmark in their opener, Tunisia lost to Australia in their second match and must beat the world champions to stand any chance of advancing.
- Twice champions France are competing at a 16th World Cup, having been in the field for the first tournament in Uruguay in 1930. They are now nine games unbeaten at the finals since their 2014 quarter-final defeat to Germany in Rio de Janeiro.
- Tunisia were the first African country to win a game at the World Cup finals when they beat Mexico 3-1 in Argentina in 1978.
- Ten of Tunisia's 26-man squad were born in France and they have three players based at French clubs.

Previous meetings: This is a first competitive clash between the two countries after two home victories in friendlies for France and two 1-1 draws in Tunis, the last in 2010.



Preview

Denmark's goal drought is no joke for Hjulmand

Denmark in their showdown with Australia today need nothing less than a win, to keep alive any hope of advancing to the last 16

Reuters
Al Rayyan

So desperate is Denmark coach Kasper Hjulmand to see his team break out of a World Cup scoring drought that he joked he might have to ask to borrow Norwegian striker Erling Haaland.

While that produced a good laugh Denmark's scoring issues are no joke as they prepare for a Group D showdown with Australia today needing nothing less than a win over the Socceroos to keep alive any hope of advancing to the last 16.

The high-powered Danish attack which produced 30 goals in 10 World Cup qualifiers has sputtered in Qatar, finding the back of the net just once and that score coming courtesy of defender Andreas Christensen in a 2-1 loss to France.

With just two goals from two games the Australians are not lighting up the scoreboard either but thanks to a 1-0 win over Tunisia sit second in the group on three points and in pole position to follow leaders France into the next round.

Declaring his squad fully fit and ready for duty yesterday, Hjulmand has plenty of options up front but was unwilling to share them. "The way it looks now everyone is ready," said Hjulmand. "We have 26 players they all deserve to play. They are all good enough and deserve to play. "All we have to look at is what kind of technical approach should we take tomorrow, what structure should we play with, who do we know fits together.


Denmark's coach Kasper Hjulmand attends a press conference at the Qatar National Convention Centre (QNCC) in Doha, yesterday.

"I trust all the players we have brought so there is many ways to do it."

The Denmark coach has left no stone unturned trying to find the combination to bring goals. After a toothless attacking performance in the goalless draw with Tunisia, Hjulmand shook up his forward line for France.

He brought in Andreas Cornelius for Kasper Dolberg and Jesper Lindstrom for Andreas Skov Olsen, but the changes had little impact as the Danes failed to register a shot on target in the first half.

Searching for a spark up front, Hjulmand again decided to shake things up bringing on Martin Braithwaite for Cornelius to start the second half and later substituting winger Mikkel Damsgaard for Sevilla striker Kasper Dolberg. Despite the changes, the only goal for the Danes came from Christensen.

Although tactics may change, Hjulmand assured his team's identity will not."Structures are always different from game-to-game, it is not always the same structure," said Hjulmand.

"But the identity the philosophy is always the same the way we play should be the same every time.

"It's about winning and we try our best to do that and play our socks off."


Denmark players train at the Al Sailiya SC, yesterday.

Fact Box

AUSTRALIA vs DENMARK

When: Today, 6pm **Where:** Al Janoub Stadium, Al Wakrah
Capacity: 44,325

Key stats:
- Denmark must beat Australia to have any chance of advancing to the last 16.
- Australia are currently second in the group and can go through with a draw if Tunisia fail to beat France, who are already through.
- Australia have only made it out of the group stage once, in Germany in 2006, where they lost 1-0 to Italy in the last 16.
- The Danes have made the last 16 four times (1986, 1998, 2002 and 2018). They reached the quarters in 1998 in France.
- This is the second consecutive World Cup in which Australia have played in the same group as Denmark and France.
- Denmark scored 30 goals in their 10 World Cup qualifiers but have managed only one in Qatar, scored by defender Andreas Christensen.

Previous meetings:
- Australia and Denmark have met four times previously. The most recent meeting was at the 2018 World Cup, which ended in a 1-1 draw.
- The Danes hold the upper hand with two victories to Australia's one.

Opinion

Exploits can put football on map in Australia: coach

AFP
Doha

Australia coach Graham Arnold said yesterday that his team's exploits at the Qatar World Cup can "put football on the map" at home and unite the nation.

Australia are on the cusp of reaching the last 16 for only the second time in their history, matching the achievement of a "golden generation" who made the same stage in 2006.

Victory over Euro 2020 semi-finalists Denmark today will guarantee a spot in the knockout rounds while a draw could also be enough.

Arnold declared that in a sports-mad country where football traditionally comes behind cricket, both rugby codes and Australian rules, the Socceroos "unite the nation" like no other national team.

Arnold said that the 1-0 win over Tunisia which put Australia in pole position to join holders France from Group D in the knockout rounds had put smiles on faces.

But speaking on the eve of the Denmark showdown, Arnold cautioned: "Putting smiles on Australian faces once is not enough, let's do it some more times." Arnold is also looking at the bigger picture and what a good run in Qatar will do for football's popularity in Australia.



Australia coach Graham Arnold speaks during the press conference at the Main Media Centre in Doha, yesterday.

He wants change, including more investment at youth level, to grow the game in the country and hopes this World Cup will inspire future generations in Australia to take up football.

"I've said many times: it's not about me, it's about the game in Australia," said Arnold.

"To leave a legacy is huge," added Arnold, 59, who was assistant coach to Guus Hiddink at the 2006 World Cup, where Australia boasted the likes of Harry Kewell, Mark Viduka and Tim Cahill. Arnold said the current Socceroos squad — which have plenty of heart but no world stars — had been inspired by the 2006 run.

"This generation, they were 10 years of age watching these guys," Arnold said.

"When you sit down even now in the lunch room this generation is talking about emulating the 2006 squad and achieving the same goals they saw when they were 10 years old.

"So it's about putting the game on the map a bit more in Australia.

"But again, there's so much more work to do...it's crazy."

Focus

Fernandes believed Ronaldo had scored first goal against Uruguay

AFP
Doha

Bruno Fernandes said he thought Cristiano Ronaldo had scored Portugal's opener in their 2-0 win over Uruguay on Monday even though he was credited with the goal.

The Manchester United midfielder's cross towards Ronaldo flew straight in but the veteran striker was a whisker away from making contact with the ball.

Fernandes added the second from the penalty spot late on after Uruguay were penalised for handball and he was chosen as man of the match.

The win guaranteed Portugal's progress to the last 16 in Qatar.

"I celebrated as if it had been Cristiano's goal, it seemed to me that he had touched the ball, my aim was to cross the ball for him," Fernandes said.

"What's important is that we were able to go to the next round and (secure) a very important win against a very tough opponent."

Fernandes warned that Portugal would have to be at their best in their final group match on Friday against South Korea, with a point enough to guarantee them top spot in Group H.

"We know we will find a very organised team in front of us with a huge skill-set, as we've seen in their last matches," added Fernandes.

"We've played at different times and that has allowed us to watch South Korea play. Our objective is to win every match, and we have one ahead of us."



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo and Bruno Fernandes celebrate after the match against Uruguay at the Lusail Stadium on Monday.

Portugal coach Fernando Santos chose to praise the whole team instead of focusing on Fernandes.

"I think it's the result of the team's work," said Santos.

"If the team does not play well then the player himself will not have a good performance.

"I think in the first two games, the team has played well. Diogo Costa (the Portugal goalkeeper) saved two important shots, so I don't think we should be focusing on individual players."

'Superman' Souttar typifies Scottish influence on Australia squad

AFP
Doha

Mitch Duke was the goalscoring hero when Australia beat Tunisia to claim their first World Cup win in 12 years but nothing summed up the Socceroos' performance in that game quite like the last-ditch goal-saving tackle from giant centre-back Harry Souttar.

Souttar was likened by one commentator to Superman as the hulking 1.98m-tall defender, put in a colossal display at Al Janoub Stadium, and clips of his brilliant challenge on Tunisia's Taha Yassine Khenissi in that game have gone viral online.

It was not just the 24-year-old's performance as Australia kept a first World Cup clean sheet since 1974 that was remarkable, but also the simple fact that he is in Qatar with Graham Arnold's side.Souttar spent a year on the sidelines after suffering a serious knee injury in a World Cup qualifier against Saudi Arabia.

He only just returned in the nick of time to play one game for his club Stoke City and make the Australian squad.

"I've only played three games so I don't think I'm 100 percent fit but I give 100 percent in every game," he said, but in any case the last year was especially trying for other reasons.

His elder brother Aaron died of motor neurone disease in July, putting everything into perspective for a player who was born in Aberdeen in Scotland.

His other brother John, who now plays for Rangers, chose to represent Scotland but Harry opted for Australia, for whom he was eligible through his mother.

It is a decision he clearly doesn't regret and his performances in Qatar have also delighted John, even if he could be jealous of his sibling after Scotland failed to qualify.



Australia's Harry Souttar (centre) attends a training session at the Aspire Academy in Doha on Monday.

'BEST DECISION'

"I spoke with him after the game and he's delighted with me," Harry said at Australia's training base in Doha. "We speak every day and we have become a lot closer over the past year.

"In terms of the Australia thing, I got the phone call and it was a very simple decision from my point of view, and it is probably the best decision I've ever made." The number of Australians with Scottish heritage is considerable and the Scottish influence is striking throughout the Socceroos' squad.

As well as Souttar there is Jason Cummings, a striker who was capped for Scotland before opting to switch to Australia in time for the World Cup — he was eligible via his Perth-born mother.

Then there is Martin Boyle, an Aberdeen-born winger who plays in Scotland for Hibernian but whose father is from Down Under. He would have been a key player in Qatar only to be struck down by a knee injury just before the tournament, although he has remained with the squad. "We have moved him into the staff now as 'OVM' — Official Vibe Manager — to keep all the boys up, because he is just one of the most fantastic blokes you will meet in your life," said Arnold.

Midfielder Jackson Irvine, whose father is Scottish, played for Scotland at youth international level and has played for four clubs there including Celtic, while goalkeeper Mathew Ryan's mother is Scottish.

Their squad is also littered with players who ply their trade in Scotland, including Souttar's centre-back partner Kye Rowles, of Hearts, and Celtic's Aaron Mooy. It is not insignificant that Mooy's manager at Celtic is Ange Postecoglou, a revered figure in Australian football who coached the Socceroos at the 2014 World Cup.

"Ange is part of the reason," said St Mirren's Keanu Baccus when asked why so many Australians have ended up there.

"The door definitely opened for us to go there and showcase ourselves in a strong league and to improve and get better, and there are a lot of eyes on the game too.

"It is good for us as players and good for the national team."

Not that it would be too wise a decision to seek inspiration from Scotland, who have been absent from the World Cup since 1998 and have never reached the knockout rounds at the finals.

That is Australia's goal when they meet Denmark today.

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Spotlight

Spain's veterans learning from spectacular Pedri: Koke

'The older players learn from the younger ones, he does things that many of us don't do on the pitch'

AFP
Doha

Spain midfielder Pedri only turned 20 last week but his team-mate Koke says even the squad's veteran players are learning from him at the World Cup.

Pedri burst into the limelight in 2020 with Barcelona as a teenager and played a key role for Spain at the Euro last summer.

The midfielder has been one of the World Cup's most impressive players so far, running the midfield in Spain's 7-0 destruction of Costa Rica and holding his own in the heavyweight clash against Germany, a 1-1 draw.

His club colleague Gavi, 18, has also impressed in Qatar alongside Pedri in midfield, and Koke praised the creative Barcelona duo.

"The two of them make magic, their level is spectacular given their age," Koke told a press conference yesterday.

"Pedri is spectacular, you might not think so but the older players learn from the younger ones, he does things that many of us don't do on the pitch.

"I learn from him, seeing the good things he does, it's spectacular playing beside Pedri."

The 30-year-old Koke, at his third World Cup, also said he and the squad's other veterans, including Sergio Busquets, Jordi Alba and Cesar Azpilicueta, were offering their younger team-mates support in return.

"All this unity makes for such a strong and healthy group of players," said Koke.

"The young players have to be excited and that brings nerves. They have to enjoy it, and be calm.

"The older players try to bring that calmness, we have to take advantage of these moments."

NO FEAR

Koke may have a chance to start in La Roja's final World Cup group match against Japan tomorrow, with qualification for the last 16 on the line.

If Luis Enrique's side earn at least a point they will be guaranteed to progress to the knockout phase, while victory would guarantee them top spot.

Should Spain finish top of their group and progress to the quarter-finals, they would be in line to face Brazil if Tite's side, favourites to win the tournament, do the same. However Koke said Spain would not be trying to game the system and avoid the five-time World Cup winners.

"The only strategy is to go out and win against Japan," said Koke.

"We'll see if we end up facing Brazil or not. We don't fear anybody and we respect everybody."

Koke has featured as a substitute in the opening two matches of the tournament, but changes may beckon in the final group match.

Sergio Busquets was booked against Germany and would be in danger of suspension for a prospective last-16 tie if he saw another yellow card against Japan, opening the door for Koke to feature.

Busquets' natural replacement Rodri Hernandez has played the first two games at centre-back and was training away from the main group yesterday, on a stationary bicycle.

Gavi, who suffered a knock to the knee against Germany, was also cycling individually, but both players are expected to return to full training today, a Spanish football federation source told reporters.



Spain's forward Dani Olmo (right) and midfielder Pedri (second right) take part in a training session at Qatar University training site in Doha on Monday.

Opinion



Uruguay coach Diego Alonso has acknowledged his team would have to play better than they have done so far, in a goalless draw with South Korea and the Portugal defeat.

Uruguay coach Alonso says Ghana clash will be different this time

AFP
Doha

Uruguay coach Diego Alonso on Monday dismissed the importance of the South American side's controversial 2010 World Cup quarter-final victory over Ghana ahead of their crunch clash in Qatar.

In South Africa 12 years ago, Uruguay reached the semi-finals after ousting Ghana on penalties. Uruguay forward Luis Suarez deliberately handled the ball on the goalline deep into extra time to prevent a certain goal, with Asamoah Gyan then missing the subsequent spot-kick.

Despite Suarez's dismissal, Uruguay made the Africans pay in the shootout.

Both sides are bidding to join Portugal in the last 16 from Group H, with South Korea also still in the hunt.

"It's a different story, for both of us," said Alonso following Uruguay's 2-0 defeat to Portugal on Monday.

"We will both go looking for qualification. Friday will be decisive but it's a very different story to what happened 12 years ago."

Ghana are in pole position to reach the last 16 having beaten South Korea 3-2 earlier on Monday. But they still need to win to guarantee their knockout place while both Uruguay and South Korea, who play Portugal, have to win to have any chance of staying in the World Cup.

In order to progress, Alonso acknowledged his team would have to play better than they have done so far, in a 0-0 draw with South Korea and the Portugal defeat. "The team has to loosen up and motivate itself more to play, like we did in the second half today," said Alonso.

"We need to take risks, to be the brave team of the qualifiers and the second half today."

Speaking earlier, after his team's win against South Korea, Ghana coach Otto Addo played down the significance of the rematch.

"I'm a strong believer if you don't seek too much for revenge for these kind of things, sometimes you get even more blessings," he said.

Focus

Brazil admit toiling at contest without injured Neymar

AFP
Doha

Brazil midfielder Bruno Guimaraes admitted the World Cup favourites lacked some of their usual verve after they needed a late Casemiro strike to beat Switzerland and secure a place in the last 16.

The five-time World Cup winners knew a second straight win in Group G on Monday would clinch their place in the knockout phase with a game to spare. But it looked like they would have to settle for a draw until Manchester United's Casemiro, not known for his goalscoring, popped up with a deflected strike seven minutes from time to seal a 1-0 win.

"It was a really difficult game and a 0-0 suited them, but the most important thing is that we are through," said Newcastle's Guimaraes, who came on as a second-half substitute at Doha's Stadium 974.

He replaced Fred, who was in the starting line-up in the absence of Neymar, sidelined with an ankle injury suffered in Brazil's opening 2-0 win over Serbia. "Neymar is such a player, a real star. What team wouldn't miss him?" he asked.

Despite the absence of Neymar, matchwinner Casemiro believes Brazil are a more complete team now than four years ago, when they crashed out of the World Cup in Russia in the quarter-finals.

"Four years have gone by and there are new players," said the former Real Madrid star, who was one of the few survivors from a draw with Switzerland in the 2018 group stage.

Tite's side are yet to concede a goal in Qatar, having let in just five goals in 17 games in South American qualifying.

"Our defenders are more experienced and that is another match with a clean sheet, but it's not just about Alisson or the back four, it starts from Richarlison up front," Casemiro said.

"I think we have a wider range of options."

Neymar's absence against Cameroon confirmed

Neymar will play no part in Brazil's final World Cup group game against Cameroon on Friday as he continues his recovery from an ankle injury, the national team's doctor has confirmed.

The Paris Saint-Germain superstar missed Monday's 1-0 win over Switzerland after coming off with a sprained ankle in his side's opening 2-0 victory in Qatar against Serbia.

Coach Tite has expressed his confidence that the 30-year-old will return to play a part in the Selecao's bid to win a record-extending sixth World Cup, but he will not feature against Cameroon with Brazil's place in the last 16 having already been secured.

"Neymar has had a bit of a fever which is under control and has not got in the way of his recovery from his ankle injury," said Brazil team doctor Rodrigo Lasmar in a video released by the Brazilian Football Confederation.

Right-back Danilo is also recovering from an ankle injury of his own suffered in the Serbia win, while left-back Alex Sandro picked up a muscle injury against Switzerland.

"Those three players will all be unavailable for our next match against Cameroon," added Lasmar.

A draw against Cameroon will confirm Brazil as winners of Group G, while even a defeat will not stop them topping the section if Switzerland fail to win their final game against Serbia. **(AFP)**

Ecuador youngsters 'will have their revenge'

Ecuador coach Gustavo Alfaro said he expected the young players in his team to get their "revenge" in the future after yesterday's World Cup elimination.

La Tri lost 2-1 against Senegal and finished third in Group A, despite a promising win over hosts Qatar in their first game and a good showing in a 1-1 draw with eventual group winners the Netherlands.

While the team's top goalscorer was veteran Enner Valencia on three goals, younger stars including Brighton duo Moises Caicedo, 21, and Pervis Estupinan, 24, all impressed.

"Through the pain that we all have, we should not lose sight of the fact that this experience can serve these youngsters in the future," Alfaro told a press conference. "Composure is gained through battles you must have — they will have their revenge down the line."

The Argentine coach, 60, said he was considering his own future in charge of the national team. "We were unfortunately knocked out of a beautiful dream that these guys had been weaving for two years," added the former Boca Juniors manager, who took over Ecuador in 2020. "I need time to know what I will do in my professional life, which decisions I will make.

"We had already spoken to the federation and agreed to meet after the World Cup. I need to stop for a moment and see what I want to do, going forward, if I still want to be a coach or not." **(AFP)**

Reaction

Senegal stars 'shone' in Mane's absence: Koulibaly

AFP
Doha



Senegal's forward Ismaila Sarr (centre) celebrates with teammates after the team won the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group A football match against Ecuador at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha yesterday.

Senegal captain Kalidou Koulibaly said yesterday he never gave up hope of reaching the World Cup knockouts when star striker Sadio Mane was ruled out, even if most of the world doubted them.

Koulibaly's second-half goal was the difference as Senegal beat Ecuador 2-1 to book a spot in the last 16 for only the second time in their history.

The Chelsea defender was named man-of-the-match and dedicated the win to Mane, who was forced out of the tournament with a knee injury picked up with club side Bayern Munich.

"When it came to his injury, I think two thirds of the world probably doubted we would be able to qualify," Koulibaly told the post-match press conference. "The only ones who thought we could still qualify were the African people and the Senegalese people."

Koulibaly, whose goal was his first in 67 appearances for Senegal, revealed his side had been inspired from a pre-game message from Mane.

"He sent us a message before the game. Even though he is not here (in Qatar), he is with us."

The 31-year-old defender said he needed to take a leading role when news of the former Liverpool striker's injury was confirmed.

"I couldn't believe it when I heard about his injury. I knew there would be a lot more pressure, but we are a team," he said.

"Yes, Sadio is a star — he is a symbol of the Senegalese football team — but there are 11 players on a football field.

"This is their time to shine".

Manager Aliou Cisse said during the week that Mane was "here with us" and regularly contacted several members of the squad.

Normally cool and calm, manager Cisse showed rare emotion after Koulibaly's winner, screaming with delight on the touchline.



Pre___view

Messi, Lewandowski carry Argentina and Poland hopes

'It's not Messi vs Lewandowski — it's not tennis match, it's not one-on-one. They're not serving to each other'

By Sahan Bidappa
Doha


Argentina's Lionel Messi (second right) gestures next to teammates during a training session at the Qatar University in Doha yesterday, on the eve of the World Cup Group C match against Poland. *(AFP)*

Czeslaw Michniewicz reminded today's decisive clash between Poland and Argentina was not a tennis match but a football contest between two sides vying for a place in the last 16 of the World Cup.

Despite Poland coach's desperate plea, there is little doubt the two team's future in the tournament will hinge on their star players' performances at Stadium 974.

Argentina's left-footed magician Lionel Messi, vying for that elusive title in what most likely is his fifth and final World Cup, will be up against Robert Lewandowski, the Polish scoring-machine plotting an upset against the Group C favourites. The two players may vary in style but are worth their weight in gold for their teams and will have to play a crucial role if Argentina or Poland need to qualify for the last 16.

Poland, who have not reached the knockout stage since 1986, they go through with a win or a draw against Argentina. A loss would still keep them in fray, if Saudi Arabia doesn't beat Mexico. Argentina, on the other hand, must beat Poland to be sure of going through, while a draw will be enough if Saudi Arabia and Mexico draw.

"It's not Messi vs Lewandowski — it's not tennis, it's not one-on-one. They're not serving to each other," Michniewicz said, offering other sports as a reference in his press conference at the Qatar National Convention Centre yesterday. "Robert needs his teammates, like Leo does. They rely on their teammates. They can't do this alone, although these individual players can do a lot themselves."

Michniewicz then switched to skiing and compared Messi to Alberto Tomba, the Italian skier from the 1980s and '90s who won Olympic gold medals in slalom and giant slalom. It was an impressive rhetoric from the Polish coach, who was just highlighting his team's mammoth task of keeping Messi quiet in today's game.

"Messi behaves on the pitch like Alberto Tomba on the slopes," Michniewicz said. "He is able to avoid everyone, like Alberto Tomba was able to get around everything. So we need to put players around Messi. If he is able to ride through everyone, we won't be able to stop him."

Like Messi, the 34-year-old Lewandowski is also his nation's all-time top scorer, on possibly his last mission at a World Cup. He uncharacteristically missed a penalty in Poland's opening draw with Mexico before scoring his first ever World Cup goal in their 2-0 win over Saudi Arabia. "He is a top player and it will be a privilege and pleasure to see him from up close as a football fan," Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni said. "Is he at the same level as Messi? You just have to enjoy such a good player. Why compare one player with another? That's not helpful."

Argentina have won six out of their 11 games against Poland, while the Poles won the last time the sides met in 2011 in a friendly. But 35-year-old Messi and his teammates have huffed and puffed to stay alive in the competition, having come into Qatar on an unbeaten 36-game run. After suffering one of the biggest upsets in the tournament's history at the hands of Saudi Arabia in their opening game, the two-time champions beat Mexico thanks largely to Messi's goal and his assist for Enzo Fernandez.

Scaloni has been under attack in his home country for his team selection. The 44-year-old coach has been criticised for not playing Juventus midfielder Leandro Paredes against Mexico, where Scaloni made five changes.

"Leandro has always been with us and the consideration is the highest, we love him a lot. He's always been involved, just because he doesn't play at times doesn't mean we don't trust him," said Scaloni, before adding he had complete confidence in his 26-man squad regardless of who he decides to start.

Scaloni said he is yet to decide his final line-up for today's match. "We're expecting a difficult match. Poland are a team that at times close well in the box and also create situations for you in the box. We have to see who is playing. It's different depending on who is there. Our idea is quite clear. We'll try to defend set pieces with concentration."

Scaloni said their stuttering World Cup campaign was now in the past and all that mattered was the match against Poland and a spot in the last 16. "For us the most important game is the one we are about to play. Whatever happened is in the past and remains there."

Meanwhile, defender Lisandro Martinez said Argentina was yet to peak in the tournament. "We know what we are capable of. We can play better and we know we have not reached our best level yet. But we are trying," said Martinez.

"We have to be well organised so they don't get us on the counter-attack," added the Manchester United defender on the threat Lewandowski's poses.

Fact Box

ARGENTINA vs POLAND

When: Today, 6pm
Where: Stadium 974
Capacity: 44,089

Key stats:
- Poland have kept a clean sheet in their last three World Cup matches, including both in 2022.
- Poland won four of their first seven World Cup games against South American sides (L3) but lost each of their last three in the competition without scoring a single goal.
- Argentina lost their last two World Cup games against European nations – Croatia (3-0) and France (4-3) in 2018.
- Poland will advance with at least a draw, while Argentina may also advance with a draw depending on the result of the other group game.

Previous meetings:
- This is the third time Poland and Argentina will meet at the World Cup. Poland won 3-2 in 1974 and Argentina won 2-0 four years later. Argentina have won six of their 11 meetings overall, with Poland winning three. The teams last played an international friendly in June 2011, which Poland won 2-1.


Poland's forward Robert Lewandowski takes part in a training session at the Al Kharaitiyat SC yesterday. *(AFP*

Mexico captain Guardado defends Messi after Alvarez threat

Doha: Mexico captain Andres Guardado has defended Lionel Messi after boxer Canelo Alvarez issued a threat to the Argentine having taken offence at a video appearing to show the striker nudging away a Mexico jersey on the floor with his foot.

Messi scored in Argentina's 2-0 win over Mexico at the World Cup on Saturday and Mexican Alvarez, who has around 2.2mn followers on Twitter, said the striker "should ask God that I don't find him" having taken offence at the video. But the 36-year-old Guardado, who is playing in his fifth World Cup, said he saw nothing out of the ordinary himself.

"It's an agreement with the props: when you leave everything sweaty on the floor it's all to wash," Guardado told reporters. "I've had the fortune and the privilege of facing Messi for many years in Spain... I know the person he is. Unfortunately, maybe Canelo doesn't understand what it's like in a dressing room."

Mexico must win their final Group C match against Saudi Arabia today to have any chance of reaching the last 16 in Qatar.

Match___Report

Rashford stars as England sink Wales to set up Senegal clash

AFP
Al Rayyan


England's Marcus Rashford scores against Wales during FIFA World Cup at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday. *(Reuters)*

England booked a World Cup last 16 clash against Senegal as Marcus Rashford and Phil Foden inspired a 3-0 win against Wales that sent their neighbours crashing out of the tournament yesterday.

Gareth Southgate's side sealed first place in Group B thanks to key contributions from Rashford and Foden after they were restored to the team by the England boss. Foden showed why there has been such a clamour for him to start as he won the free-kick that Rashford converted to break the deadlock early in the second half at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan.

Foden doubled England's lead just seconds later to effectively ended the one-sided 'Battle of Britain' and Rashford struck again to ensure Wales' first World Cup since 1958 ended in disappointment. With Foden and Rashford providing the cutting edge so lacking in their previous match – a dour goalless draw against the United States – England won for just the second time in their last nine games.

A spluttering first half showed the Three Lions still have room for improvement as they chase a first major trophy since the 1966 World Cup. But the ruthless way they demolished Wales after the break provided encouragement ahead of Sunday's showdown with Group A runners-up Senegal.

While England fans regard Germany and Scotland as their main rivals, Wales have never hidden how much they enjoy getting one over on their hated neighbours. The Wales squad were famously filmed celebrating England's embarrassing Euro 2016 exit against Iceland, while Welsh striker Kieffer Moore recently said he would love to knock the English out of the World Cup.

With those slights in mind, condemning Wales to elimination was a welcome bonus for England. But more importantly they eased the angst that had mounted since they were booed off after the lethargic United States stalemate that followed their 6-2 rout of Iran in the group opener. Rashford, one of four changes by Southgate, had a golden opportunity to give England an early lead when he surged onto Harry Kane's pass, but he took too long to shoot and Danny Ward raced off his line to save. Unable to lay a glove on England, Wales barely made it out of their own half as Southgate's men monopolised possession for long spells without producing the breakthrough.

When England increased their tempo and passed with more urgency, they immediately scythed through the Wales defence, but Foden's shot whistled wide. Criticised for his performance in the defeat against Iran, Wales captain Gareth Bale was anonymous again and the former Real Madrid star, possibly injured, was substituted at half-time.

Yet within six minutes of the restart, Bale's absence was rendered irrelevant by England's quick-fire barrage. Southgate had said he was concerned about Foden feeling under pressure to deliver after the calls for him to be selected, but he didn't need to worry after the precocious Manchester City playmaker.

Foden was the catalyst for England's opener as he drove forward to win a 50th minute free-kick that Rashford brilliantly curled into the far corner of Ward's goal from 25 yards.

Match Stats

WALES		ENGLAND
0		3
7	Shots	18
1	Shots on Target	7
5	Chances Created	11
1	Corners	6
4	Saves	1
36%	Possession	65%
1	Offsides	1
16	Fouls	9
2	Yellow Cards	0
0	Red Cards	0

SPORT

FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022

Preview

Make history or you will be forgotten, says Saudi coach

Saudi Arabia need to beat Mexico in their last Group C match to guarantee reaching the last 16 for the second time

Reuters
Al Rayyan

Saudi Arabia's players have the chance to write history if they qualify for the World Cup knockout stages, coach Herve Renard said yesterday. Saudi Arabia need to beat Mexico in their last Group C match to guarantee reaching the last 16 for the second time regardless of the outcome of the Poland versus Argentina game.

Saudi Arabia are third in the group with three points, behind Argentina on goal difference, while Poland have four points and Mexico are bottom with one point. "Saudi Arabia have a good generation, and the only time the national team qualified for the last 16 was in 1994, so if the players want the fans to remember them, they should write history or they will be forgotten within 30 years," Renard told a news conference.

"All teams are strong, and we still have a chance in the third match. Mexico have a lot of experience in the World Cup and we have to fight to stay in the tournament."

The French coach said captain Salman al-Faraj, Mohamed al-Burayk and Yasser al-Shahrani will miss the game with injuries while Abdulelah al-Malki is suspended. "We will miss the efforts of four important players, but as I said before, I have a squad of 26 players, and we have to deal with the matter and fight to qualify tomorrow," he said.

The 54-year-old indicated that it was the third most important match of his coaching career after winning the Africa Cup of Nations with Zambia and Ivory Coast.

"It is the third after the finals in 2012 and 2015, because the defeat in these matches leaves you with regrets and regrets damage your life, so we have to be positive and play with determination and spirit with the support of the fans, and the fight for qualification will be until the last minute. "So people with fragile hearts should be careful and not watch the match," he added with a smile.

Renard said he was well acquainted with Mexico and their coach Tata Martino. "If you want me to tell you the starting lineup for Mexico, I can. Mexico have a strong team and a great coach because he previously trained Barcelona, which is not easy," he said.

"You have to give more than 100% and we only think about qualifying. Mexico played really well against Argentina and then (Lionel) Messi came and decided everything," he added, referring to Mexico's 2-0 defeat on Saturday.

"We will try to be strong on Mexico's weaknesses and try to exploit them in order to win. We must not feel afraid and that every player should trust himself and his teammate that we can face any team."

Frenchman Renard's rousing half-time team talk in Saudi Arabia's shock come-from-behind victory over Argentina has gone down in legend. A short clip of Renard firing up his World Cup minnows when trailing 1-0 at half-time to a Lionel Messi penalty — they bounced back to win 2-1 — proved a viral hit.

He admitted that his team talks don't always have such a dramatic effect. "I accepted for the communications department to record one minute (at half-time) so this day I was lucky because it worked," Renard said. "But I'm coaching for more than 20 years now and with a lot of humility I can tell you it was not working all the time, unfortunately!"

With Saudi Arabia on the brink of a historic qualification, Renard was asked if the Mexico clash was the biggest match of his life. But he insisted that winning two finals at the Africa Cup of Nations — with Zambia in 2012 and Ivory Coast in 2015 — remained more important. "Those are meetings that you must not mess up, otherwise you will regret it your whole life. "Having regrets is the most harmful thing you can have in life, and you must always be positive."



Saudi Arabia's French coach Herve Renard attends a press conference at the Qatar National Convention Center (QNCC) in Doha yesterday, on the eve of the Qatar 2022 World Cup match against Mexico. *(AFP)*

Fact Box

SAUDI ARABIA vs MEXICO

When: Today, 10pm
Where: Lusail Stadium
Capacity: 88,966

Key stats:
- Mexico have failed to score in their last four World Cup matches.
- Saudi Arabia are looking to match or surpass the achievements of their World Cup debut in 1994, when the Gulf state advanced to the last 16.
- The last time Mexico failed to progress from the group stage was in 1982.
- Mexico must win to have any chance of staying in the competition, and they will be sure to go through if Poland beat Argentina in the other Group C match.
- Saudi Arabia will reach the last 16 if they win.
- A draw will take the Saudis to the knockout round if Poland defeat Argentina, but if both matches are tied, they will go out as the Copa America champions have a better goal difference.

Previous meetings: Saudi Arabia and Mexico have faced each other five times since their first meeting in January 1995. Mexico won four of those games, including the last one in 1999, while one game ended in a draw.


Mexico's defender Kevin Alvarez (centre) takes part in a training session with teammates at the Al Khor Sports Club yesterday. *(AFP)*

France's Frappart to be first woman referee at men's World Cup



Doha: Stephanie Frappart will become the first woman to referee a men's World Cup match after FIFA announced yesterday that she will take charge of tomorrow's Group E match between Germany and Costa Rica. France's Frappart is one of three women referees among the 36 selected for the tournament in Qatar, alongside Rwandan official Salima Mukansanga and Japan's Yoshimi Yamashita.

Three other female officials have travelled to the World Cup as assistant referees. For the 38-year-old Frappart, refereeing her men's World Cup match is the latest step in a rapid rise to the top level in Europe. She was the first woman to referee in France's Ligue 1 in 2019, the same year she took charge of the women's World Cup final in her home country.

Frappart also officiated the 2019 UEFA Super Cup final between Liverpool and Chelsea, before refereeing the Champions League in 2020 and then the French Cup final last season.

Match Report

Pulisic sinks Iran as US advance in World Cup duel

AFP
Doha

Christian Pulisic fired the United States into the last 16 of the World Cup yesterday as the Americans downed Iran 1-0 in their politically charged grudge match. Chelsea star Pulisic bundled home the do-or-die Group B game's only goal on 38 minutes to set up a second round clash with Group A winners the Netherlands on Saturday.

The victory was no less than US coach Gregg Berhalter's youthful side deserved in what was only the third international football clash between the bitter ideological rivals.

The build-up to a pulsating showdown had been marked by steadily escalating tension, with Iran's Football Federation on Sunday demanding FIFA sanction US Soccer for posting a modified version of their country's flag on social media.

But despite an electrifying atmosphere at Doha's Al Thumama Stadium, yesterday's game played out without controversy as the US avenged their 1998 World Cup defeat to Iran to send the Asian qualifiers crashing out of the tournament.


USA's forward Christian Pulisic scores against Iran during the World Cup Group B match at the Al Thumama Stadium in Doha yesterday. *(AFP)*

Iran's fans had roared their team onto the field at the start of the game amid a deafening cacophony of air-horns and cheers from the crowd of 42,127. But despite the intimidating reception it was the Americans who looked more comfortable, quickly establishing their dominance.

The US signalled their attacking ambition after only two minutes, Pulisic surging forward menacingly before being dispossessed.

That was a shape of things to come as they laid siege to the Iranian goal. Valencia midfielder Yunus Musah shot over the bar and Pulisic just failed to get enough power on a header after a cross from Antonee Robinson. Fullback Sergino Dest was a constant threat down the right flank for the Americans, whipping a cross over in the 17th minute that Iran goalkeeper Alireza Beiranvand could only parry.

After sustained US pressure, the breakthrough finally came in the 38th minute. A brilliant cross-field pass from McKennie picked out Dest down the right. The AC Milan defender headed back across goal and Pulisic was on hand to bravely finish.

There was alarm for US fans with Pulisic needing sustained treatment after a heavy collision with Beiranvand but it was the Iranians and their noisy fans who were left winded by the goal. Josh Sargent and Tim Weah combined well with a dazzling counter-attack but the final ball went astray. Then in injury time McKennie's sublime pass found Weah who finished brilliantly past Beiranvand only to be ruled just offside. Knowing that an equaliser would send them into the second round, the Iranians stepped up the pressure in the second half. But substitute Saman Ghoddos squandered two gilt-edged chances to get his team into the match, heading over from close range before blazing a shot over the bar on the 65th minute with the whole goal to aim at. Saeid Ezatolahi curled a long-range shot over the bar soon afterwards as the Americans continued to live dangerously.

Iran threatened again inside the final 10 minutes when Ali Karimi just failed to get on the end of a teasing cross by Ezatolahi. A diving header from Morteza Pouraliganji whistled just wide in injury time and then Mehdi Taremi had calls for a penalty after a tangle with Cameron Carter Vickers waved away as to leave American nerves jangling.

Match Stats

IRAN		USA
4	Shots	12
1	Shots on Target	5
4	Chances Created	9
1	Corners	5
4	Saves	0
49%	Possession	51%
2	Offsides	1
14	Fouls	10
3	Yellow Cards	1
0	Red Cards	0

STANDINGS GROUP STAGE

Group A

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	PTS
1	**Netherlands (Q)**	3	2	1	0	+4	7
2	**Senegal (Q)**	3	2	0	1	1	6
3	Ecuador	3	1	1	1	1	4
4	Qatar	3	0	0	3	-6	0

Group B

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	PTS
1	**England (Q)**	3	2	1	0	+7	7
2	**USA (Q)**	3	1	2	0	+1	5
3	Iran	3	1	0	2	-3	3
4	Wales	3	0	1	2	-5	1

Group C

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	PTS
1	Poland	2	1	1	0	2	4
2	Argentina	2	1	0	1	1	3
3	Saudi Arabia	2	1	0	1	-1	3
4	Mexico	2	0	1	1	-2	1

Group D

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	PTS
1	France	2	2	0	0	+4	6
2	Australia	2	1	0	1	-2	3
3	Denmark	2	0	1	1	-1	1
4	Tunisia	2	0	1	1	-1	1

Group E

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	PTS
1	Spain	2	1	1	0	+7	4
2	Japan	2	1	0	1	0	3
3	Costa Rica	2	1	0	1	-6	3
4	Germany	2	0	1	1	-1	1

Group F

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	PTS
1	Croatia	2	1	1	0	3	4
2	Morocco	2	1	1	0	2	4
3	Belgium	2	1	0	1	-1	3
4	Canada	2	0	0	2	-4	0

Group G

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	PTS
1	Brazil	2	2	0	0	+3	6
2	Switzerland	2	1	0	1	0	3
3	Cameroon	2	0	1	1	-1	1
4	Serbia	2	0	1	1	-2	1

Group H

Pos	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	PTS
1	Portugal	2	2	0	0	+3	6
2	Ghana	2	1	0	1	0	3
3	South Korea	2	0	1	1	-1	1
4	Uruguay	2	0	1	1	-2	1

P- Played • W- Won • D-Draw • L-Loss • GD- Goal Difference • PTS- Points • Q- Qualified into last 16