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GULFTIMES SPORT



Match Report



FIFA WORLD CUP
Qatar2022



Messi magic as Argentina reach WC quarter-finals

FORMER WORLD CUP CHAMPIONS WILL TAKE ON NETHERLANDS IN THE LAST-EIGHT CLASH ON FRIDAY



Argentina's Lionel Messi shoots at goal during the match against Australia in the Round of 16 at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium. (Reuters)



"We controlled this match. Apart from the last save that Dibu (Martinez) made, we didn't suffer too much. We wanted to be here because of how it feels like and what people transmit. We must remain united"

By Rizwan Rehmat
Doha

Lionel Messi made his 1000th career appearance for country and club a memorable one yesterday when he produced a sublime goal in the first half as two-time champions Argentina outplayed Australia 2-1 to reach the quarter-finals at the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

Messi found the net in the 35th minute with a classic left-footed drive as Argentina set up a quarter-final date with Netherlands who beat USA 3-1 earlier in the day at the Khalifa International Stadium.

Julian Alvarez added Argentina's second goal in the second half (57) after a defensive gaffe from the Australian 'keeper and defenders in their own box at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.

Argentina conceded an own goal through Enzo Fernandez on a shot by Australia's Craig Goodwin in the 77th minute.

It was Messi's first ever World Cup goal in a knockout match and his third in the tournament after strikes against Saudi Arabia and Mexico.

Overall it was Messi's ninth World Cup goal, just one shy of Gabriel Batistuta's record tally of 10. Messi yesterday went passed Diego Maradona's tally of eight World Cup goals.

The goal against Australia yesterday was Messi's 789th in his career.

"We controlled this match. Apart from the last save that Dibu (Martinez) made, we didn't suffer too much," Messi said yesterday. "We wanted to be here because of how it feels like and what people transmit. We must remain united," he added. "It was a difficult day. We had very little rest time," he said.

It was Argentina's third successive win in Qatar after losing to Saudi Arabia in the opening clash of the World Cup.

The match got off to a fast start with short passes from both sides dictating the early part of the clash. In the 3rd minute, Argentina's Alejandro Gomez clipped a ball towards the Australian goal but Jackson Irvine got away with a clear handball infringement as the referee and linesman failed to take notice.

Irvine, seemingly with a pledge to stop Messi, brought down the Argentine star with an elbow to his chest in the 7th minute. After being floored, Messi got up with apparent discomfort in his chest.

Defender Nicolas Otamendi, in the 10th minute, found Alvarez in the Australian box with a long-range lob but the Manchester City forward could not lay the ball which slipped away from him.

Despite the miss, Argentines enjoyed most of the ball possession. In the 15th minute, Irvine was penalised with a yellow card for deliberately stamping on Marcus Acuna.

Gomez tried to break the deadlock with a long-range shot from the edge of the Australian box but

his right-footed drive sailed away seconds later. Shortly afterwards Irvine found Aziz Behich with a neat flick back from close to the flag post.

Behich – under pressure from Rodrigo de Paul – showed good anticipation and charged into the Argentine box with the ball. But De Paul threw his body weight to keep Behich from taking a shot at the goal as the ball went away for a goal kick.

After the first 30 minutes, Messi had barely broken a sweat or made a move as the ball continued to remain on the flanks. Australia managed two corner kicks in the first half hour but Argentina's backline remained firm to kill the two moves.

Australians were ultra defensive in the first 30 minutes whereas Argentina failed to construct a threatening move of note. Shortly after the half-hour mark, De Paul found his captain but the game's superstar was quickly dispossessed by Keanu Baccus and Aaron Mooy on the edge of the Australian box.

Just when the spectators thought they might doze off, Messi found the back of the Australian net. Messi – from the flank – slipped a ball towards Alexis Mac Allister who was close to the Australian box. Mac Allister tapped the ball to Otamendi positioned inside the Australian box while Messi moved closer to the action himself.

Otamendi, the Benfica defender, tapped a short cross back to Messi and backed off. Messi positioned himself and then drilled a low shot between the legs of a defender to the right of keeper Mathew Ryan in the 35th minute.

Trailing by a goal, Australia's tall defender Harry Souttar harshly stomped on Messi's left foot but the referee once again ignored calls for a free kick near the Australian box.

Early in the second half, Gomez was benched

with Lisandro Martinez, the Manchester United defender, stepping in. Seconds later, Messi found very little wriggle room for a left-footed drive from the edge of the Australian box but his feeble shot was easily punched by 'keeper Ryan after the Argentine great slipped while taking the shot.

Alvarez doubled the lead in the 57th minute when a schoolboy error from Ryan allowed Argentina to jump to a 2-0 cushion. Kye Rowles flicked the ball to his 'keeper Ryan who was challenged by De Paul inside the box. The Socceroos 'keeper tried to push the ball away as Alvarez charged in. Alvarez managed to send the ball into the net with a feeble shot that Ryan could not stop as thousands of Argentine fans jumped with joy in the stands at Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium.

Messi could have added one more but he was brilliantly blocked by Australia's Milos Degenek when the Argentine skipper was set to take a shot from the six-yard box in the 66th minute. In the 75th minute, Irvine upended Lautaro Martinez with a rough tackle but the referee surprisingly signalled play on.

Seconds later, Australia reduced the deficit when Goodwin unleashed a powerful drive from the edge of the Argentine box. The ball hit the head of Fernandez and went into the Argentine net with 'keeper Emiliano Martinez in no position to make a save.

In the 81st minute, Australia's Behich charged into the Argentine box, hoodwinked four blockers but his shot from close range was tapped away by Lisandro Martinez with a lunge in what could have been the most spectacular goal of the tournament.



Argentina's Lionel Messi celebrates scoring their first goal with teammates. (Reuters)

Match Stats	
ARGENTINA	2
Shots	14
Shots on Target	5
Chances Created	11
Corners	1
Saves	1
Possession	60.6%
Offsides	3
Fouls	8
Yellow Cards	0
Red Cards	0
AUSTRALIA	1
Shots	5
Shots on Target	1
Chances Created	3
Corners	3
Saves	3
Possession	39.4%
Offsides	0
Fouls	15
Yellow Cards	2
Red Cards	0



Spotlight

FIFA WORLD CUP
Qatar 2022

SPORT



Record-breaking African teams bounce back from 2018 distress

The 2022 tournament has seen two teams from the continent reach the knockout phase for only the second time

AFP
Doha

Four years ago Africa was left without a representative in the World Cup last 16 for the first time since the round was introduced in 1986, but the response has been emphatic in Qatar.

The 2022 tournament has seen two teams from the continent reach the knockout phase for only the second time – after Algeria and Nigeria in 2014.

African nations have also taken a record-breaking 24 points in the group stage, smashing the previous best of 15 points in 1998. Morocco beat the world's second-ranked side Belgium and Canada en route to the top of Group F, while Senegal bounced back from an opening defeat by the Netherlands to record wins over Qatar and Ecuador.

Brazil were beaten by an African team for the first time with a 1-0 defeat by Cameroon, who exited the tournament in glory.

For Morocco, their clash with Spain next Tuesday will be a first appearance in the knockout stage for 36 years.

Their fans will turn up in their thousands again to cheer on the only remaining Arab country in the World Cup.

"We hope to fly the flag of African football high," said Morocco coach Walid Regragui.

"Often we've been described as being sub-par, not as good as elsewhere."

"But I think at this World Cup we are showing we can give any other team a run for their money, whether they be European teams or South American teams."

"I hope in the future this means we'll be seeing more African teams do well at the World Cup and why not an African champion?"

The 2026 World Cup in the United States, Canada and Mexico will involve more African countries than ever before, with the tournament set to expand from 32 to 48 teams.

If it does not happen this year, Africa will be expecting its first World Cup semi-finalists sooner rather than later. Senegal were the closest to getting past the group stage in Russia in 2018, missing out by virtue of having more yellow cards than Japan.

But they banished those memories when Kalidou Koulibaly volleyed them to victory against Ecuador, after saying they were inspired by Morocco's win over Belgium.

"We saw what Morocco did. They had a beautiful win over Belgium," said Senegal coach Aliou Cisse.

"Yes, it can be a source of inspiration for us."

CHANGING MINDSET

The sides that went out in the



Morocco's coach Walid Regragui oversees a training session at the Al Duhail SC Stadium in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

group stage still made a mark on the tournament. Tunisia claimed a famous 1-0 win over holders France and Cameroon ended

an eight-match losing streak at the World Cup with a thrilling comeback to draw 3-3 with Serbia before beating five-time

winners Brazil.

More and more African players are starring at top European clubs.

Even with Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mane absent from this World Cup, the dividends of that are clear to see. European

teams have won each of the past four World Cups and no side from outside Europe or South America has ever even reached the final.

"You have to be strong for your first match against a European team because European teams are our foes when it comes to these events," added Regragui.

"We have players who play for European clubs... We need to take the European mindset and make it our mindset."

The closest an African team has come to making the semi-finals was Ghana in 2010, when Luis Suarez's handball and the resulting missed penalty by Asamoah Gyan led to a shootout defeat in South Africa.

The Black Stars could not avenge that heartbreak on Friday, as Andre Ayew's missed penalty at 0-0 was history repeating itself history and proved costly in a 2-0 defeat.

But Ghana were at least happy to knock Uruguay out and send South Korea through. "For me, yes (It was good to knock Uruguay out)," said midfielder Daniel Amartey.

"It was tough because you can see their centre-back, everybody comes (forward)."

"Uruguay needed one goal to go through."

There is a long way to go, but for the second time, Africa has two hopeful nations that are three wins away from the final.

Focus

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Best still to come from favourites after shocks galore at competition

AFP
Doha

The World Cup in Qatar has already delivered plenty of major shocks but as it moves into the knockout phase the top contenders including Brazil and France have plenty to prove.

This is the first World Cup since the South Africa tournament in 2010 in which teams from Asia, Africa and North America have all been represented in the last 16.

Brazil remain the favourites to claim a sixth World Cup and end Europe's recent dominance on the global stage.

Tite's side surely need Neymar back from the ankle injury he suffered in the opening win over Serbia but they have a dazzling array of attacking talent beyond the world's most expensive footballer.

They are usually rock-solid defensively, even though a side with nine changes to the starting line-up lost their final group game against Cameroon.

Brazil have not yet faced top opposition and will expect to cruise past South Korea tomorrow, with Croatia or Japan then awaiting them in the quarter-finals.

A mouthwatering showdown with Argentina in the semi-finals remains a possibility, with Lionel Messi and his teammates recovering from their shock loss to Saudi Arabia to beat Mexico and Poland.

If Messi's team get past Australia, they could find themselves up against the Netherlands in the last eight, although the Dutch must first overcome a tough United States team.

Argentina came into the World Cup unbeaten in 36 games and with expectations high that they could win the trophy for a third time but coach Lionel Scaloni has played down their chances.

"We are not favourites," he insisted.

"We are a difficult team to beat, a team that will fight, but to think that because we won



Brazil players applaud the fans on the pitch after the match against Cameroon at the Lusail Stadium in Lusail, on Friday. Brazil have not yet faced top opposition and will expect to cruise past South Korea tomorrow. (AFP)



Japan's Ao Tanaka celebrates scoring their second goal with teammates during their win against Spain at the Khalifa International Stadium, Doha, on Thursday. Japan, who have never gone further than the first knockout stage previously, now have 2018 finalists Croatia in their sights. (Reuters)

(against Poland) we are going to be champions would be totally mistaken."

The other side of the draw is weighted towards Europe, despite elimination for Germany

fielding an unrecognisable line-up in their final defeat by Tunisia as regulars were rested.

"We fulfilled our objective," he said.

"Now we will recuperate because a second competition is about to begin."

History is not on the side of a France team looking to become the first since 1962 to successfully defend the World Cup, and they are on a possible collision course in the last eight with England.

Spain, the joint-top scorers in the group stage with England on nine goals, are also on their side of the draw.

Seni-finalists in 2018 and Euro 2020 runners-up, England are quietly growing in confidence.

"In Russia, we were just thinking, 'Can we win a knockout game?' Now there is more confidence and more experience of knockout matches," said England manager Gareth Southgate.

It was German great Jurgen Klinsmann, part of FIFA's tech-

nical study group analysing the tournament, who predicted that Qatar would produce shocks.

"If some of the kind of underdogs – maybe if it's an African nation, if it's an Asian team – if they are courageous I think you can go far in this tournament," he said.

The last-16 line-up does at least reflect the global nature of football. Japan, who have never gone further than the first knockout stage, stunned Germany and Spain and now have 2018 finalists Croatia in their sights. South Korea have also qualified after a last-gasp winner against Portugal.

Qatar has also already been a good World Cup for Africa, with two teams in the last 16, compared with none four years ago.

Senegal, who have overcome the loss of Sadio Mane, will face England, while a talented Morocco side are living up to their billing and will have the backing of many across the Arab world when they play Spain.

Brazil are still the favourites for most, but there is a sense there are more surprises in store.

Skipper Son eyes 'another miracle' against Brazil

AFP
Doha

Son Heung-min wants his South Korea side to pull off "another miracle" and beat Brazil tomorrow in the World Cup last 16 after their last-gasp heroics against Portugal.

The Koreans' tournament looked to be over until substitute Hwang Hee-chan popped up in injury time to score the winner in a 2-1 victory over already qualified Portugal on Friday in Qatar.

That propelled them into the knockout rounds and a daunting date with Brazil, one of the pre-tournament favourites.

But skipper Son, who has been playing in a mask following surgery last month for a fracture around his left eye, said they are not ready to go home just yet.

After what has been a tournament of surprises, the Koreans now want to pull off another one.

"This is great but our tournament is not over," Spurs attacker Son said following the emotions of the dramatic win over Portugal.

"We've always talked about reaching the round of 16 as our

objective but we should now try to go beyond that," Son, who shed tears of joy, told Korean media in Doha. "I hope we can script another miracle," he added, having set up Hwang with a searing run and threaded pass through the legs of a Portuguese defender.

Some in South Korea are beginning to draw parallels with the national side of 2002 who stunned the world as co-hosts by reaching the semi-finals.

Current assistant coach Sergio Costa, who took charge from the sidelines for the Group H clash with Portugal because coach Paulo Bento was suspended, resisted such talk.

"I cannot compare because I watched the World Cup in 2002 on TV and didn't know them personally," said Costa, having masterminded the win over his native Portugal in his boss's absence.

"I've seen a few games from the past but I cannot make a comparison because I didn't know the Korean team back then. "I can tell you what it is now – it's a team that is very honest."

"That is something that we are very proud of, we see those players with a strong personality and they deserve what we have accomplished," he added.



Son Heung-min is hoping for the South Korean team to go beyond the round of 16. (AFP)



Glimpses of Qatar 2022







Pre__view

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France know full well there is more to Poland than Lewandowski

France's ideal scenario will be to contain the Barcelona forward and avoid ending the game on penalties

Reuters
Doha

Most of France's talk ahead of their last-16 clash with Poland has been about how Les Bleus will handle Robert Lewandowski, but the defending champions are well aware there is much more to the Poles than their big-name striker.

Lewandowski is indeed a deadly weapon up front, but Poland are a very compact side with another major asset at the other end of the pitch in keeper Wojciech Szczesny, who has already stopped two penalties.

Across his career, Szczesny has saved 26 of 87 penalties and it is safe to say that France will be desperate to avoid a shootout at the Al Thumama stadium today.

"They've had to defend a lot in the group stage and they defended very well. Actually they love it, but they're not just a defensive team – just look at who they have up front," coach Didier Deschamps told a news conference yesterday.

"But there's more. They have a backbone of players with great international experience, with Kamil Glik, Piotr Zielinski, Grzegorz Krychowiak and some youngsters who have shown they were up to the task. They deserve to be here."

Poland have only had five shots on target in three games, but three of them came from Lewandowski, who only needs half a chance to find the back of the net. France's ideal scenario

Fact Box

FRANCE vs POLAND

When: Today, 6pm **Where:** Al Thumama Stadium, Doha **Capacity:** 44,400

Key stats:

- ◆ France have become the first reigning World Cup champions to reach the knockout stages since Brazil in 2006.
- ◆ France are unbeaten in their last seven meetings with Poland across all competitions (W3 D4), with their last defeat against the Poles coming in a friendly in 1982 (0-4).
- ◆ Poland have progressed from a World Cup group stage for the first time since 1986, when they lost 0-4 to Brazil in the round of 16.
- ◆ Wojciech Szczesny has become just the third goalkeeper to save two penalties (excluding shootouts) in a World Cup after American Brad Friedel (2002) and his own compatriot Jan Tomaszewski (1974).
- ◆ Against Argentina (2-0) on matchday three, Poland conceded for the first time at the 2022 World Cup.

Previous meetings:

Poland won the only previous World Cup clash between the sides, the third-place play-off match in the 1982 tournament (3-2). Their two last games which had anything at stake – both Euro 1996 qualifiers – ended in draws.

will be to contain the Barcelona forward and avoid ending the game on penalties, which are certainly not keeper Hugo Lloris' cup of tea.

Lloris milestone

Lloris, who will equal Lilian Thuram's France record of 142 caps today, has only stopped 16 of the 108 spot kicks he has faced in his career, a shortcoming that cost France dearly at the European championship last year when they were bundled out in the last 16 by Switzerland on penalties.

"We've been looking into pen-

alties with the analysts but there is a psychological factor that comes into play, and also how the penalties are taken," the France captain said.

Lloris added, however, that France had what it takes to down Poland in regulation time if they stay focused throughout. "Some keepers are better at (penalties) but if we're fully focused from start to finish, we have the weapons to win it before we get there," he said.

"We need to have that killer instinct."



France's coach Didier Deschamps (right) and assistant coach Guy Stephan (second right) speak together as (from left) forward Kylian Mbappe, defender Jules Kounde, midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni, and forward Ousmane Dembele walk past them during a training session at the Al Sadd SC training centre in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

Spot__light

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Poland coach eyes France upset as springboard

AFP
Doha

Poland coach Czeslaw Michniewicz believes his side can go on to lift the World Cup trophy in Qatar if they get past defending champions France in their last-16 tie today.

The Poles reached the knockout rounds of the World Cup for the first time since 1986 after scraping through on goal difference from Group C despite a 2-0 loss to Argentina in their final game.

"We were not ready to go home," said Michniewicz, who only took over the Poland job in January after the departure of Paulo Sousa.

"If we win against France we could become the next world champions."

"We're very happy to play the world champions. France are not already guaranteed to advance. Everything's to play



Poland coach Czeslaw Michniewicz speaks during the press conference at the Main Media Centre in Doha yesterday. (Reuters)

for, you win or go home and the stakes are high."

Michniewicz said he had been unable to pinpoint weak points in France's "wonderful team".

"We believe we will play a good game but we know it's a huge challenge ahead of us," he said. "We want to show the world we can play football."

Robert Lewandowski scored the first World Cup goal of his prolific career in the 2-0 win over Saudi Arabia after he had a penalty saved in Poland's opening 0-0 draw with Mexico.

Michniewicz admitted his team needs to do more to supply the Barcelona striker, with Poland managing just four shots on target in three games so far

in Qatar. "We did not create enough opportunities for Robert," he said. "They (strikers) need to be near the penalty box. Against Argentina the opponent didn't allow us to do a lot.

"We need to improve on that but we need to realise that France will be dictating the game."

Poland must try and subdue a France attack led by Kylian Mbappe, who was left out of the starting line-up for the 1-0 defeat by Tunisia as Didier Deschamps made nine changes with qualification already assured.

"How to defend against him (Mbappe)? I think we'd need to have scooters because he's so fast," quipped Poland forward Arkadiusz Milik, who has come up against the Paris Saint-Germain star with Marseille.

"It's difficult to play against one of the best players in the world. We need to play collectively as a group. No one is able individually to stop him."

But he said he wanted to "face the best" after those heroes and he got his chance against Lionel Messi and Argentina in a nerve-jangling final round of group games.

Harshly penalised for catching Messi in the face while challenging for a cross, Szczesny plunged to his left to palm away the seven-time Ballon d'Or winner's effort from the spot.

It proved crucial as Poland squeezed through the group stage ahead of Mexico on goal difference despite scoring just twice in three matches.

"I was fortunate twice this competition," Szczesny told RAI Sport. "It's a great moment in the career of a player, the World Cup is the maximum and this is special."

Szczesny stands tall for Poland at competition

AFP
Doha

It hasn't always been this way for Wojciech Szczesny at major tournaments, but Poland largely have their goalkeeper to thank after reaching the World Cup last 16 for the first time since 1986.

On the eve of Poland's opening game in Qatar, Szczesny was asked about his misadventures at past finals - his only previous World Cup and three European Championships were marred by a red card, costly blunders and injury.

"I think each tournament has its own history," replied Szczesny, who has shrugged off those bad memories and become the first 'keeper since 2002 to save two penalties at the same World Cup.

First he kept out Salem al-Dawsari's spot-kick in a 2-0 win over Saudi Arabia as part of a breathtaking double save, producing a sensational reflex stop to deny Mohamed al-Burayk from the rebound.

"It's good for goalkeepers, because we can't become heroes by scoring goals. At least sometimes we can help the team by making big saves," said Szczesny.

But he said he wanted to "face the best" after those heroes and he got his chance against Lionel Messi and Argentina in a nerve-jangling final round of group games.

Kylian Mbappe heads a fearsome French attack that should be well rested after coach Didier Deschamps heavily rotated his line-up for the 1-0 loss to Tunisia.

While Szczesny, who says this will be his final World Cup, hasn't lost his sense of humour, he also hopes to prolong the adventure. "They are big favourites, they are one of the best teams in the world, but we will do our best to try and pass this round. The key to stop Mbappe? Myself?" he said.

It's been a rollercoaster ride for the former Arsenal stopper, who at 32 appears to be at the peak of his powers.

"I asked him how he was getting older and better at the same time," said back-up keeper Kamil Grabara, who



Poland's goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny takes part in a training session at Al Kharaitiyat SC in Doha, yesterday. (AFP)

goes into it, too, but in order to save a Messi penalty, you need some luck as well!"

MBAPPE NEXT UP

Fully recovered from injuries that hampered him early this season with Juventus, the 1.96m (6ft 5in) Szczesny figures to have another huge job on his hands when Poland play defending champions France today.

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"I asked him how he was getting older and better at the same time," said back-up keeper Kamil Grabara, who

hopes Poland's success will prompt Szczesny to reconsider his international future.

After being sent off in the Euro 2012 opener when Poland were co-hosts, Szczesny played no further part at Euro 2016 after an injury in the first group game.

An ill-advised charge out of his goal again cost Poland at the 2018 World Cup and he scored an own goal as the Poles kicked off their Euro 2020 campaign with a loss to Slovakia.

But those tough moments will fade from memory if Szczesny carries Poland deep into the draw, and he is determined to enjoy every bit of it - joking with Messi during the VAR review before his penalty.

"We spoke before the penalty, and I told him I would bet him 100 euros that he (the referee) wasn't going to give it," said Szczesny. "So I've lost a bet against Messi."

"I don't know if that's allowed at the World Cup - I'm probably going to get banned for it! But I don't care right now."

"I'm not going to pay him either - he doesn't care about 100 euros, I think he has enough."



Poland's forward Robert Lewandowski and teammates attend a training session at the Al Kharaitiyat SC in Doha yesterday. (AFP)

Tyler Adams
(USA)

The Leeds midfielder exuded calm both on and off the pitch as the United States booked a spot in the last 16 with a tense 1-0 win over Iran in their final match.

Named captain just before the World Cup, the 23-year-old led by example at the heart of a youthful midfield - playing alongside Weston McKennie and Yunus Musah - which more than held its own against England and dominated Wales.

Adams also demonstrated remarkable maturity and composure as he deftly handled being peppered with questions unrelated to football ahead of the politically charged Iran game.

His performances in Qatar have reportedly caught the eye of some of Europe's biggest clubs.

5

breakout stars of the group stage

Lionel Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo and Kylian Mbappe grabbed plenty of the headlines as their countries sailed through the group stage of the World Cup, but many others have also risen to the occasion in Qatar. AFP Sport looks at five breakout stars from the first round of the tournament.

Enzo Fernandez (Argentina)

Fernandez had never started a game for Argentina before the World Cup but his performances in Qatar have made him a vital part of Lionel Scaloni's side.

The 21-year-old midfielder came off the bench to score a wonder strike against Mexico, then created his team's second goal after making his first start in their 2-0 win over Poland.

Fernandez joined Benfica from River Plate in the summer and quickly impressed, helping his new club top their group in the Champions League.

Fernandez's goal against Mexico made him Argentina's second-youngest goalscorer at the World Cup - after Lionel Messi.

Josko Gvardiol (Croatia)

An emerging defensive star in a Croatia side in need of renewal, Gvardiol's last-ditch block on Romelu Lukaku saved the 2018 runners-up from going out to Belgium.

The 20-year-old fractured his nose and suffered severe swelling around his right eye barely a week before the tournament after colliding with an RB Leipzig teammate but that hasn't affected his play.

He has not only stood out as the masked man but as the bedrock of a Croatia back-line breached just once so far. "He's the best defender in the world," said Croatia coach Zlatko Dalic. "Even if he's not currently number one, he will become number one."



Jude Bellingham (England)

Bellingham is appearing at his second international tournament after playing for England at last year's European Championship, and it is easy to forget that he is still only 19.

The Borussia Dortmund player has become an integral part of Gareth Southgate's midfield in Qatar and announced himself with a well-taken goal in England's opening 6-2 win over Iran.

Bellingham has racked up plenty of big-game experience with Dortmund and he looked completely at ease alongside Declan Rice as England topped Group B.

Cody Gakpo (Netherlands)

The Dutch forward was the only player to score in all three group games - carrying over his red-hot form for PSV Eindhoven onto the biggest stage.

Gakpo's header in the Netherlands' opening match against Senegal broke the deadlock late on in a 2-0 victory.

He drilled the Dutch ahead with a fierce left-footed drive against Ecuador in a 1-1 draw and again set the Oranje on their way with another tidy finish on his right as they cantered to a 2-0 win over Qatar. "He has everything it takes to become a star," said Netherlands coach Louis van Gaal.

It is surely only a matter of time before he is pried away from his boyhood club, with Manchester United a possible destination.

Star Players



Suarez, Cavani make undignified exits from World Cup stage

AFP
Doha

The sight of a tearful Luis Suarez hiding his face in his shirt and an enraged Edinson Cavani knocking over a VAR monitor encapsulated Uruguay's sadness and frustration at their World Cup exit. For the two striking greats, both 35, it was a deeply undignified and undignified way to leave the biggest stage for the final time.

Uruguay beat Ghana 2-0 on Friday but crashed out of the Qatar tournament on goals scored because of South Korea's last-gasp 2-1 win over Portugal.

But the South American side did not go quietly or with dignity.

Their players surrounded and harangued German referee Daniel Siebert after the final whistle, with the official dishing out two yellow cards, including to Cavani.

There had been similar scenes during an incident-packed match in which Siebert awarded a penalty to Ghana but waved away two Uruguayan appeals.

Having hit the woodwork three times in their two previous games and conceded another controversial penalty in their 2-0 defeat to Portugal, Uruguay leave Doha with a lot of regrets and a feeling of what might have been.

Suarez and his teammates believe they were the victims of injustice, penalised by refereeing decisions that went against them, even after VAR reviews.

"Leaving a World Cup hurts



Uruguay's forward Luis Suarez reacts at the end of the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group H match against Ghana at Al Janoub Stadium in Al Wakrah. (AFP)



Uruguay's Edinson Cavani is shown a yellow card by referee Daniel Siebert. (REUTERS)

but we have the tranquility that we GAVE EVERYTHING for our country," Suarez wrote on Twitter.

"PROUD to be URUGUAYAN even though THEY DON'T RESPECT US" he added in a bar presumably directed at world football's governing body FIFA.

- Anonymous - The sense of

injustice was a common theme in the emotionally charged aftermath of Friday's match - a member of the Uruguayan delegation berated a journalist in the post-match press conference about the penalty given against the South American side in the Portugal game.

In truth, Uruguay's demise

was not a surprise since Suarez and Cavani had better days.

They occupy the top two spots on Uruguay's all-time record scorers' list, with Suarez as number one, and were part of the teams that reached the World Cup semi-finals in 2010 before winning the Copa America the following year. Injuries

have limited Cavani's game time in recent years and while he has made an impressive start with his new club Valencia - four goals in seven games - it is more than four years since he played 30 or more league games in a single season.

He was a peripheral figure at the World Cup, starting only one game, in which he was substituted off, and hardly having a shot at goal.

Suarez, for his part, spent the first part of this season back in his homeland with boyhood club Nacional ahead of an expected move to Major League Soccer after the World Cup.

His days on Europe's biggest stages, playing for Ajax, Liverpool, Barcelona and Atletico Madrid, are over.

He was anonymous in Uruguay's first two group games before rolling back the years against Ghana, having a hand in both goals.

But he finished the game in tears after Uruguay fell just short, burying his head in his shirt as the realisation of failure sunk in.

Cavani lost his cool haranguing the referee, picking up a booking and then angrily knocking over the VAR monitor.

Suarez and Cavani were never likely to light up the World Cup in Qatar but nobody expected them to leave it in this way - making headlines for their emotional reactions rather than their goals.

It was a sad exit for two of the greats of the modern game.

Focused

Japan have 'heart and courage', not star names, says Croatia's Majer

AFP
Doha

Croatia midfielder Ljubomir Majer hailed World Cup surprise package Japan for having "heart and courage" ahead of their last 16 confrontation tomorrow.

The Asian side remarkably topped Group E ahead of Spain, who finished second, leaving four-time champions Germany and Costa Rica eliminated.

Japan came from behind to beat both former World Cup winners Germany and Spain in remarkable upsets, up against teams filled with star players. Majer said he did not expect Japan to finish top of the group but that they deserved their achievement.

"I have to be honest, I didn't expect that, no one expected them, in the world of football," Majer told a press conference yesterday.

"But kudos to them, they showed that in football they don't just play with names, but with heart and courage. They deserved this."

"We expect a tough game, it's the knock-out phase."

"We expect a very tough game with a lot of running and fighting, we feel that we are ready and we are looking forward to seeing each other on the pitch."

Croatia have caused surprises themselves in the past and finished as runners up at the 2018 World Cup.

They thrashed Canada 4-1, with Majer on the scoresheet, as well as drawing 0-0 against both Morocco and Belgium to qualify in second place from Group F.

Majer says there is no chance his team will underestimate Japan, having seen plenty of shocks at the tournament, with Saudi Arabia beating Argentina, Tunisia overcoming France and Brazil tumbling against Cameroon.

"If you underestimate someone, today, it will bite you back," added Rennes midfielder Majer.

"We have seen there have been immense surprises at the World Cup - what does it mean to be a favourite in that context?"

"The most important thing is to get ready for the match and the opponent."

Croatia and Celtic defender Josip Juranovic will face club teammate Daizen Maeda in the clash at Al Janoub Stadium. "We watched the match against Spain all together," said Juranovic.

"I play with Maeda at Celtic, he's a very good player. I already congratulated him on qualifying from the group, we are looking forward to seeing each other on the pitch."



SPORT

FIFA WORLD CUP
Qatar 2022

QATAR

Match Report

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Dutch delight ends American dream

The Netherlands become the first country into the World Cup quarter-finals as they beat the US 3-1 at the iconic Khalifa International Stadium

Match Stats

NETHERLANDS	USA
11	17
6	Shots on Target
10	14
4	Corners
5	Saves
41.6%	Possession
0	Offsides
10	Fouls
2	Yellow Cards
0	Red Cards

Netherlands' Denzel Dumfries celebrates scoring their third goal with Teun Koopmeiners against the United States at Khalifa International Stadium in Doha yesterday. (Reuters)

Netherlands players celebrate after qualifying for the Qatar 2022 quarter-finals yesterday. (AFP)

By Yash Mudgal
Doha

It was a seasoned performance by the Louis van Gaal side, much to the delight of Dutch fans at Khalifa International Stadium yesterday.

The Netherlands performance also ended the United States World Cup dream, entering the quarter-finals with a 3-1 win. The USA battled hard but lacked a cutting edge as first-half goals from Memphis Depay and Daley Blind and a late strike from Denzel Dumfries sealed the deal. USA started the game looking positive but since then, the Louis van Gaal boys who have a commanding 2-0 lead at the break, have tactically outsmarted the Americans.

The Netherlands, in search of their first World Cup title after losing in three previous finals, will face Argentina in the quarter-finals at Lusail Stadium on Friday.

"We always want to improve and, since the start of the tournament, it's been getting better and better with each game," Louis van Gaal said.

Louis van Gaal has now gone eleven World Cup games in charge without

defeat, second only to Brazilian Luiz Felipe Scolari as a coach to never lose on the grand stage. "I was very critical at half-time. We were in the lead 2-0.

However we suffered in the first half, we were dispossessed so often and that's not acceptable at a World Cup. If you play like that against top countries you won't make it."

The US had the game's golden chance when Christian Pulisic was denied by the legs of Dutch goalkeeper Andries Noppert in the fourth minute and the failure to take that opportunity proved highly expensive. And after that, the United States did just what the Netherlands wanted them to.

In the 10th minute Coady Gakpo, who scored in the first three group games, made space for Depay to blow past the United States midfield to finish the chance created by Denzel Dumfries. Again before the half, a fullback Sergino Dest was caught flat-footed for Daley Blind to finish in a fullback to fullback goal that drove home the Dutch style of play.

Changes came at halftime with Gio Reyna entering for Jesus Ferreira but that wasn't enough to get back into the

game. Haji Wright pulled one back from a Netherlands collapse before Dumfries capped his excellent game with an 81st minute goal to put things out of sight.

Depay opened the scoring for Netherlands, slotting the ball into the net with a shot from inside the box. Right on the cusp of half-time, Daley Blind swept in Netherlands' second to put his team 2-0 ahead. Haji Wright pulled one back for USA in the second-half to instil some hope in the hearts of fans. Just minutes later, Denzel Dumfries scored his first goal of the tournament to seal the deal.

This is the third consecutive exit from the last 16 for the USA. In 2014 and 2010, they were knocked out in the pre-quarter-finals by Belgium and Ghana. "When you look at the difference between the two teams, there was some offensive finishing quality that Holland had that we were lacking," USA coach Gregg Berhalter said. "We don't have a Memphis Depay right now who's scoring in the Champions League, playing for Barcelona, experienced at scoring at this level."

The Americans were without Josh Sargent, who did not dress due to an ankle injury, and they missed his presence with the lack movement and space in attack. The USA, one of the unbeaten teams at the first round, have proven in Qatar they are capable of giving any side a run for their money.

In their Group B matches, USA defeated Iran 1-0, played a 1-1 draw with Wales and were involved in a 0-0 stalemate with England. USA played a much more attacking-minded and attractive brand of football compared with how they set up during their last two World Cup campaigns.

With an average age of 24, the USA were one of the youngest teams at the World Cup. Many of the players of their squad are likely to remain in the team during the next World Cup cycle.

The experience gained could serve them well as they prepare to co-host the 2026 World Cup, alongside Mexico and Canada.

Christian Pulisic of the US looks dejected alongside coach Gregg Berhalter after the match. (Reuters)

Focus

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Pele 'stable', 'no worsening' in last 24 hours

AFP
Doha

Doctors treating Brazilian football legend Pele said yesterday the 82-year-old remained "stable" after developing a respiratory infection with his condition not having deteriorated over the last 24 hours.

Pele, who was hospitalised this week amid ongoing cancer treatments, "has had a good response to care without any worsening in the clinical picture in the last 24 hours," doctors at Sao Paulo's Albert Einstein Hospital said in a statement.

Doctors made no reference to media reports earlier yesterday that the three-time World Cup winner, widely regarded as the greatest footballer of all time, was receiving end-of-life care.

Pele was admitted to hospital earlier

this week for what doctors said was a "re-evaluation" of the chemotherapy he has been undergoing since surgery to remove a colon tumour in September last year. The latest medical note came after newspaper Folha de S.Paulo earlier in the day reported that the soccer legend had been receiving palliative care after chemotherapy stopped having the expected results.

The newspaper also said he had a general swelling and cardiac issues when admitted to hospital earlier this week, as previously reported by ESPN Brasil.

His manager, family members and the hospital have not confirmed that information.

On Thursday, Pele said in an Instagram post that he was at the hospital for a "monthly visit" and thanked his supporters for the positive messages he had received.

The former Brazil, Santos and New

York Cosmos forward posted a picture of his face projected on a building in Qatar, where the World Cup is being held, next to a message saying "Get well soon".

A sign with the same message was displayed by Brazilian fans at the Lusail Stadium on Friday ahead of the national team's 1-0 defeat against Cameroon.

Meanwhile, players at the ongoing World Cup in Qatar, expressed their support for Pele.

France striker Kylian Mbappe yesterday tweeted: "Pray for the King."

England captain Harry Kane offered his support for Pele at a press conference ahead of his team's last-16 tie against Senegal.

"We send our best wishes to him and obviously all his family as well," said Kane.

"He is an inspiration amongst our game and an incredible footballer and incredible person. We wish him well."



A 'Get Well' message for Pele is displayed on the Torch Hotel building next to the Khalifa International Stadium yesterday. (Reuters)