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FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar 2022



Focus

England can't obsess over hotshot Mbappe: Walker

'This game isn't England vs Mbappe, it's England vs France'



England's defender Kyle Walker plays darts at the Al Wakrah SC Stadium yesterday. England and France will meet in one of the Qatar 2022 World Cup quarter-finals on December 10. (Reuters)

AFP
Doha

England full-back Kyle Walker says his team cannot afford to obsess about France's free-scoring Kylian Mbappe ahead of Saturday's World Cup quarter-final against the defending champions.

Right-back Walker is likely to be directly up against Mbappe, who is the tournament's top scorer so far, with five goals.

"I know he's a top player but we're not playing tennis. It's not a solo sport, it's a team game," the Manchester City defender said yesterday.

"We know he's a great player and that's why he's the focus of all questions. But let's not forget (Olivier) Giroud, who has scored countless (goals), (Ousmane) Dembele, for me just as good on the other wing."

Walker has come up against Mbappe for Manchester City in the Champions League and said the lesson was not to over-focus on the 23-year-old.

"When we played Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League, we were not just thinking of Mbappe and it's going to be the same on Saturday," he said. "Yes, he's a tool in their armoury - and a very good one - but you can't underestimate their other players."

Walker has become a key cog in England's defence, operating as an orthodox right-back in a back four in this tournament, having also featured in a three-man central defence. While he still has great pace, he is less adventurous in over-lapping down the flanks.

"I don't really bomb forward as much as I used to playing for Tottenham as a wing-back," he said. "It is about reading the game, the opponent, the formation the manager wants you to play in and adapting to that."

Walker appeared slightly irritated at frequent questions at yesterday's press conference about Mbappe and how important his confrontation with him would be.

"This game isn't England vs Mbappe, it's England vs France," he said.

"We will give respect but I'm not going to roll out a red carpet for

him to score. It's do or die as if we lose we go home," added the 32-year-old. "I do understand what I need to do and that's to stop him. It's probably easier said than done but I don't underestimate myself. I've come across great players before so I will just treat it like another game."

Walker said Gareth Southgate's men had gained useful experience in recent years - reaching the World Cup semi-finals in Russia in 2018 and the final at last year's Euro 2020 - but also felt the quality of their opponents had risen.

"I think the team was a little bit inexperienced in big game matches," he said. "OK, we knocked down some walls in Russia, winning the penalty shootout (against Colombia) and stuff like that but we were still inexperienced," he said.

"I think we are more equipped but I think the players from the other teams - when you look at Morocco for example, how well they played against a very good Spain team and got the result they wanted - you have had a few surprises with Japan and so on. I think the standard of play has gone up a bit from Russia."



England's forward Harry Kane takes part in a training session at the Al Wakrah SC Stadium yesterday. (AFP)

LEADING SCORERS

5 goals: Kylian Mbappe (France)

3 goals: Enner Valencia (Ecuador), Cody Gakpo (Netherlands), Marcus Rashford (England), Alvaro Morata (Spain), Lionel Messi (Argentina), Olivier Giroud (France), Bukayo Saka (England), Richarlison (Brazil), Goncalo Ramos (Portugal)

2 goals: Bruno Fernandes (Portugal), Mehdi Taremi (Iran), Cho Gue-sung (South Korea), Andrej Kramaric (Croatia), Mohammed Kudus (Ghana), Ferran Torres (Spain), Ritsu Doan (Japan), Vincent Aboubakar (Cameroon), Salem al-Dawsari (Saudi Arabia), Aleksandar Mitrovic (Serbia), Niclas Fuellkrug (Germany), Kai Havertz (Germany), Brel Embolo (Switzerland), Giorgian de Arrascaeta (Uruguay), Julian Alvarez (Argentina), Robert Lewandowski (Poland), Rafael Leao (Portugal)

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Focus

Defibrillator allows Blind to play in World Cup quarters

'It is something you carry with you every day. You think about it during a sprint, you actually always carry it with you'

Reuters
Doha

Netherlands defender Daley Blind would be quite entitled to pinch himself in disbelief when he walks out against Argentina in tomorrow's World Cup quarter-final.

Not because it will be his 99th international, and a second meeting with Lionel Messi and Argentina after the 2014 semi-final in Brazil, but more that he has been able to continue playing despite twice suffering cardiac incidents on the field.

Blind, 32, has an implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) in his chest to detect an irregular heart beat and deliver a life-saving shock in the event of sudden cardiac arrest.

It is the same device that allowed Christian Eriksen to resume his career after the horrific drama of his cardiac arrest playing for Denmark at last year's European Championship.

Blind, who spent four years at Manchester United in between spells with Ajax Amsterdam, had a suspected heart attack in a Champions League game for Ajax against Valencia in 2019, feeling dizzy and quickly being taken off for treatment.

Doctors diagnosed a heart rhythm disorder and initially suggested his professional ca-

reer was over. "You saw everyone looking at me with fear," Blind recalls in an emotive documentary called Never Again Standing Still about dealing with the condition, which was released just before the World Cup kicked off.

His former Ajax teammate Eriksen also appears in the film and Blind tells of how the reaction of his father Danny, also a Dutch international and now Louis van Gaal's assistant at the World Cup, gave him the drive to continue.

"Something that has always stayed with me was my father's reaction. He remained so stoic. He did not give up, he kept asking the doctor if there were any other options. His sober vision gave me hope."

SCREAMING INCIDENT

Eight months after being fitted with the defibrillator, Blind suffered another incident when he suddenly collapsed on the pitch, screaming as the ICD went off.

However, he was able to get up and walk off the pitch and was given the all-clear by doctors not long after.

"It is something you carry with you every day," Blind says.

"You get up with it, you go to work, you take your medicine. You think about it during a sprint, you actually always carry it with you. It was only after a year that I went into a game without thinking about it. Then



Netherlands' Virgil van Dijk, Davy Klaassen, Marten de Roon, Daley Blind and Wout Weghorst during training at Qatar University Training Site 6, Doha, yesterday. (Reuters)

I called my dad to tell him." Blind now sits on the cusp of a career highlight as the Netherlands get

ready to take on Argentina. He scored in last Saturday's last-16 clash against the United States

and, along with fellow wing back Denzel Dumfries, was the star of the show in a convincing 3-1 win.

"I feel very fit and can do everything a normal person can do. Once in a while I go for checks

but as long as I still have that drive, I will try to get the most out of it," he adds.

Spotlight

Journeyman Noppert relishing his Cup dream



Netherlands' defender Virgil van Dijk (left) and goalkeeper Andries Noppert give a press conference at the Qatar University in Doha during the Qatar 2022 World Cup. Netherlands and Argentina will meet in one of the Qatar 2022 World Cup quarter-finals tomorrow. (AFP)

AFP
Doha

Two years ago, Dutch goalkeeper Andries Noppert's career was going nowhere and he thought about quitting football. Now he is preparing to face Lionel Messi and Argentina in a World Cup quarter-final.

Noppert was a back-up in the Dutch second division with only a handful of professional appearances under his belt as recently as 2020, and considered quitting to join the police.

He decided to stick with it and his career took off after joining Go Ahead Eagles, before a subsequent move to Heerenveen caught the eye of Netherlands coach Louis van Gaal.

Now the 28-year-old is first choice for the Dutch at the World Cup in Qatar, having only made his international debut in their

tournament opener against Senegal. He will go up against Argentina in tomorrow's quarter-final and he is unfazed at the prospect of facing Messi from the penalty spot.

"It depends on the moment - he can also miss and we've seen it in games in this tournament," Noppert said yesterday.

"He is the same as us, he is human. For sure he is good, but for sure I can catch penalties."

Noppert has played all of the Netherlands' games so far in Qatar, conceding only two goals on their way to the quarter-finals.

The tallest player in the tournament at 6 feet 8 inches (203cm), he has won praise for his shot-stopping ability and command of his penalty area.

But his inclusion in the team still causes him to smile in amazement, having come so far in such a short time.

"When you are a small guy, I think you dream about going

to the World Cup," he said. "For sure I also dreamed about it but when you see my career, I put the dream away because I think it's not possible any more."

"But I keep fighting, keep pushing and I think there is only one coach who can bring me here, and that is our coach."

SURPRISE SELECTION

Van Gaal sprung a surprise by leaving out long-term Dutch number one Jasper Cillessen from his World Cup squad.

Instead he picked Noppert along with Feyenoord's Justin Bijlow and Ajax's Remko Pasveer - a trio with only eight caps between them before the tournament began.

The uncapped Noppert was still expected to travel as a back-up, but van Gaal thrust him into the starting line-up and he has not looked back since.

"For me every game is the same - I am going into the nets to catch

the ball," said Noppert. "I have in my opinion the best defence in front of me so I'm not worried about the game that we play."

"The goal is that we win the title."

Noppert is full of praise for van Gaal, who he says gives the players left on the bench "a good feeling".

He knows what it is like to be far from the action, having spent most of his career as a back-up at clubs such as NAC Breda, Foggia and Dordrecht.

Now he is front and centre as the Netherlands look to win the World Cup for the first time, and he is taking it all in his stride.

"For me it's not pressure," he said. "I have one goal and that's to get the World Cup, and it's not pressure that we haven't won the World Cup yet."

"This is the most important thing, that I don't get more pressure. I don't think so. I don't feel it," he said.

GRIEZMANN FLOURISHING IN NEW ROLE FOR FRANCE AT WORLD CUP



France's Antoine Griezmann, Theo Hernandez and Hugo Lloris during training at FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 in Doha yesterday. (Reuters)

Doha: While Kylian Mbappe dominates the headlines for France, Antoine Griezmann's performances in a new midfield role have also been crucial for the holders on their run to Saturday's World Cup quarter-final against England. Griezmann had a difficult start to the season at Atletico Madrid and has not scored in Qatar, leaving Mbappe and Olivier Giroud to provide the goals as France seek to become the first team in 60 years to successfully defend the World Cup.

It all seems a world away from Euro 2016, when Griezmann was the tournament top scorer with six goals as France, the hosts, reached the final only to lose in extra time to Portugal. That was seen as just the start for an exciting team known as the "Griezmann Generation" but it was the emergence of Mbappe that helped them go one step further and win the 2018 World Cup.

Griezmann has since adapted and become more of a support player to France's biggest star. Now the clinical finisher who averages almost a goal every second game for Atletico is part of a midfield three at international level.

It is a case of needs must for coach Didier Deschamps, who lost the key midfield pair of Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kante to injury prior to the tournament, before forward Karim Benzema withdrew after arriving in Qatar.

As a result, France have lined up in a 4-3-3 at this World Cup, with Ousmane Dembele and Mbappe flanking Giroud in attack, while Griezmann operates to the right of a midfield three with Aurelien Tchouameni and Adrien Rabiot. "My role is quite free," said Griezmann, who has 42 goals for his country but none now in 13 appearances going back to November last year. "With three players in front of me I have more possibilities and more choices. Maybe I am not as close to the opposition area. I am not going to have 50 shots on goal per game but I am not

worried about scoring goals. "I think the team needs me more at the heart of the action. We need that balance."

The 31-year-old can now show off his range of passing and his workrate from midfield, while also providing a threat with his set-piece deliveries. "Antoine has an incredible range to his game. He has fantastic technique, subtlety with his passing, and he works hard for his teammates," said assistant coach Guy Stephan. "The new position suits him. You just need to see the smile on his face."

Griezmann has remarkably now played 71 consecutive matches for France, beating by a distance the previous national record of 1998 World Cup winner Patrick Vieira, who played in 44 games in a row.

There was no question of Deschamps losing faith in the player even as he endured a difficult start to the season at Atletico.

He had largely been reduced to substitute appearances for Diego Simeone's side as the club tried to escape paying a reported obligatory fee of €40m (\$42m) to Barcelona if he played over a certain number of matches.

But Atletico bought him back permanently in October after negotiating a new deal, and he had started a total of 12 games before heading to Qatar, scoring six goals.

Now he is repaying the faith shown in him by Deschamps, who gave Griezmann his international debut as a 22-year-old in 2014.

"I owe him so much. He was the one who called me up and we have been together ever since," said the player who hails from Macon, near Lyon, but has spent his entire career in Spain.

"I give everything for this shirt, for France but also for him. I try to do everything to ensure he keeps having confidence in me. "Every game, every action is me saying thank you to him. I want to do all I can to make him proud of his number seven."



Star Player

Croatia's conductor Modric in last World Cup appearance

The veteran midfielder's side will face their biggest challenge yet when they take on Brazil in the quarter-finals tomorrow

AFP
Doha

Luka Modric said before arriving in Qatar that this World Cup would likely be his last major tournament and he has again orchestrated another deep run for Croatia.

The veteran midfielder's side will face their biggest challenge yet when they take on Brazil in the quarter-finals tomorrow.

The five-time champions sent out a warning to their fellow title hopefuls with a wonderful first-half display in their 4-1 victory over South Korea in the last 16.

But Croatia, the 2018 World Cup finalists, are likely to pose a far tougher test for the Selecao — seven of their past eight major tournament knockout ties have gone to extra-time.

Modric is still the heartbeat of the team and coach Zlatko Dalic has said he expects the 37-year-old to be involved at next year's Nations League finals.

But the Real Madrid midfielder does not see himself playing at a fifth World Cup, 20 years after his first, in 2026 in the United States, Canada and Mexico.

"I'm aware that I'm of a certain age and that this is my last competition in the Croatian national team," he told FIFA before the tournament.

Modric still toils selflessly in midfield but was clearly fading

when he was substituted in extra-time of Croatia's last-16 win over Japan on penalties.

The Balkan nation will be counting on him to dig deep again, though, as he looks to replicate the form that helped Croatia reach the final in Moscow in 2018, where they lost 4-2 to France.

"When you see people like Luka Modric running and dying on the pitch, it gives us younger players extra energy to run," said full-back Josip Juranovic.

Modric is a hero in his home nation after a 16-year international career in which he has made 159 appearances.

His trophy cabinet includes five Champions League titles with Real Madrid.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Modric broke Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo's 10-year grip on the Ballon d'Or in 2018, when he also won the World Cup player of the tournament award.

Modric grew up during Croatia's war of independence, between 1991 and 1995, during which his hometown, Zadar, and the surrounding region were heavily shelled by Serb forces.

Those experiences shaped Modric's character and made him mentally strong, according to those close to him.

"It happened a million times that we were going to training as the shells were falling, and we were running to shelters,"

said childhood friend Marijan Buljat, who trained and played with Modric while growing up.

"It is certainly one of the factors that contributed...that drove him to become one of the best in the world."

Modric's grandfather, after whom Luka was named, was killed by Serb forces, the house was burned out and the family fled to Zadar, 40 kilometres away. "I'm sad that he (grandfather) didn't get to see at least something of what I've achieved," Modric told FIFA.

It was in Zadar that Modric, born in 1985, began his footballing odyssey, catching the eye.

"I heard about a little hyperactive boy constantly playing with a football in the corridor of a refugee hotel, even going to sleep with it," said Josip Bajlo, who was then coach at NK Zadar.

Modric left Zadar as a teenager for Dinamo Zagreb and moved to Premier League club Tottenham in 2008, where he stayed for four years before moving to Spain.

Trees now grow inside the roofless ruin of his grandparents' house, in the hinterland of the coastal town of Zadar.

"Mines — Keep out!" warns a sign next to the house, lying on a mountain road winding through the Modric hamlet.

Its most famous son will be hoping to extend his final bid for World Cup glory tomorrow.



Croatia's midfielder Luka Modric (left) joins teammates in a training session at the Al Erssal training site in Doha, yesterday. (AFP)

Focus

Japan target fifth Asian title after Cup heartbreak

AFP
Narita

Japan will put their World Cup heartbreak behind them and focus on becoming Asian champions for a fifth time, captain Maya Yoshida said after the team returned home yesterday.

The Blue Samurai were eliminated from the World Cup on penalties by Croatia in the last 16 on Monday, denying them a first-ever place in the quarter-finals.

But the defeat did not stop hundreds of fans from travelling to an airport near Tokyo to welcome the players and coach Hajime Moriyasu back from Qatar.

"We won't stop here," Yoshida said at a news conference after arriving.

"We will aim to become the best in Asia," he added. "Our fight will continue. As long as we keep playing football, we must keep fighting."

The Asian Cup will also be held in Qatar after original host China dropped out due to its strict anti-Covid policies.

The tournament was set to be held in June and July 2023 but is now likely to be postponed until early 2024 to avoid Qatar's fierce summer heat.

Japan won the most recent of their four Asian Cup titles the last time Qatar hosted the tournament, in 2011.

The Blue Samurai could not find a way past Croatia in the

last 16 of the World Cup, but they stunned former champions Germany and Spain to top their first-round group.

"We couldn't reach new heights but my players showed us a new era, and this is just the beginning," said Moriyasu. Among the crowd of fans waiting to welcome the team home at the airport was 55-year-old Takamichi Masui.

He said the wins over Germany and Spain were proof that "Japan has become a soccer powerhouse". Another fan, 37-year-old Takahiro Ichikawa, said that like captain Yoshida, he is only looking ahead.

"For now, I hope the national team will focus on pulling off a solid performance in the Asian Cup in Qatar," he said.

Lovren braces for another clash with nemesis Neymar



Croatia's midfielder Mateo Kovacic and defender Dejan Lovren (right) attend a press conference at the Al Erssal training site in Doha, yesterday. (AFP)

Reuters
Doha

As Croatia prepare to face World Cup favourites Brazil in their quarter-final clash tomorrow, defender Dejan Lovren is bracing himself for another confrontation with his old nemesis Neymar.

The 33-year-old centre back Lovren has faced Neymar on three occasions and lost every time, with the unstoppable Brazilian scoring four goals against him.

Those encounters include

Brazil beating Croatia 3-1 in a World Cup group-stage clash in 2014 when Neymar scored twice and a friendly at Anfield in 2018 a week before the start of the World Cup in Russia, when he scored in his side's 2-0 win.

Croatia and Brazil have met five times in all, with the South Americans winning three times and the two sides drawing twice.

Perhaps the most painful memory for Lovren, though, will be Liverpool's 2-1 loss to a Neymar-inspired Paris St-Germain in the Champions League group stage in 2018.

Neymar scored the winner and put on a masterclass that night in Paris, with Lovren struggling to contain him.

While Liverpool had the last laugh that season, putting that loss behind them and going on to win the Champions League, Lovren all but vanished from Juergen Klopp's selection for the rest of the competition, making the starting lineup only once more.

Tomorrow, Croatia will have a bigger problem than just Neymar however, with young guns Vinicius Jr, Lucas Paqueta and Richarlison

all rising to the occasion and shining for Brazil at this World Cup. Lovren, who generally starts as a right-side centre back, will have the support of RB Leipzig prodigy Josko Gvardiol to help him. The 20-year-old Gvardiol has been brilliant so far for Croatia, putting in a number of goal-saving tackles to keep his side alive in their games.

Indeed, Croatia have conceded only two goals in their four games so far in Qatar.

Their toughest challenge yet will be to stop the Brazilian juggernaut tomorrow.



Japan's head coach Hajime Moriyasu (right) and Maya Yoshida attend a press conference in Narita, Chiba prefecture, yesterday. (AFP)



Focus



Pass-masters Spain fail World Cup test, face identity crisis

'THEY REPRESENTED PERFECTLY WHAT MY IDEA OF FOOTBALL IS'

AFP
Doha

Spain arrived in Qatar with grand dreams of winning a second World Cup, fully convinced in their style of play, but departed early yesterday, ruminating on an identity crisis.

La Roja last lifted a major trophy a decade ago at Euro 2012, while they have not won a single knockout game at the World Cup since triumphing in South Africa in 2010. Luis Enrique's side huffed and puffed but could not blow Morocco's sturdy house down in the last 16 on Tuesday, falling 3-0 on penalties after 120 goalless minutes. The north African side made history by reaching the quarter-finals for the first time, while Spain gazed forlornly back at theirs and must now wonder if it is time to move on.

They attempted over 1,000 passes against Morocco but ended up with nothing to show for it, forcing Yassine Bounou into only one save before the shootout.

There he made two more and Spain were eliminated in the last 16 again, just as they were in Russia four years ago.

"We dominated the game but we lacked a goal," lamented Luis Enrique. "We could have been more effective in the final third, but I am more than satisfied with what my players did. They represented perfectly what my idea of football is."

When Xavi and Andres Iniesta ruled the world, opponents were largely still too naive to know to stop them, and they had too much quality to be fended off for long. Now only truly elite club sides like Pep Guardiola's Manchester City can succeed by dominating the ball entirely - with perhaps the world's best striker, Erling Haaland, as the spearhead.

Against Morocco, Luis Enrique left his top scorer Alvaro



Spain's Sergio Busquets (left), Pedri and Ferran Torres (right) arrive with other members of Spain team at the Adolfo Suarez Madrid-Barajas airport in the outskirts of Madrid yesterday. (AFP)

Morata on the bench, opting instead for Marco Asensio, whom he trusts more not to lose the ball. The coach buys "the complete pack" when it comes to possession football, for better or for worse. That means there is no Plan B, with Nico Williams's pace and directness on the right flank as much of a nod as Luis Enrique will give to other ideas.

Players he left at home like strikers Iago Aspas and Borja Iglesias might have been able to offer more of a challenge to Morocco's excellent rearguard.

An element of Spain's plan may be borne of necessity. As

good as midfielders Pedri and Gavi are, they still lack a decisive, regular match-winner.

In the absence of a Kylian Mbappe, or even a Harry Kane, the coach might believe ball domination and associative play is his team's best weapon, even if it misfired in the desert.

Luis Enrique showed at Barcelona that when he had two of those forwards, plus Uruguay's Luis Suarez, he was willing to play in a different way, relinquishing control and allowing the forwards to wreak havoc as his side rolled with the punches.

"We had agreed not to take possession - not out of fear," said Morocco coach Walid Regragui, looking back at his side's victory.

Instead he made sure his midfield trio cut passing lines and left Spain with soft domination, which rarely resulted in danger for his side.

Spain's 7-0 thrashing of Costa Rica at the start of the World Cup was long forgotten by the end, one of the rare occasions where everything falls into place that perhaps keeps La Roja believing in their method.

The coach's contract expires

in the coming weeks and he will discuss his future with Spanish FA president Luis Rubiales next week. Whether the 52-year-old stays or leaves will be an indication of Spain's path ahead.

If Luis Enrique is still the coach for Euro 2024, expect him to double down on his strategy, while hoping players like Ansu Fati can step up to become the decisive weapon in the final third the team is lacking. Should he depart, Spain might start looking at other strategies, at least against opponents savvy enough to keep from being enveloped by La Roja's passing web.

Spotlight

Enrique defends philosophy and delays decision on his future

Luis Enrique believes it is "not the right time" to discuss his future after Spain slumped to a shock FIFA World Cup exit against Morocco, saying he could yet stay on as La Roja's head coach.

Spain arrived in Qatar as one of the tournament favourites but suffered a second consecutive last-16 elimination via a penalty shoot-out after a 1-1 draw at Education City Stadium. Pablo Sarabia, Carlos Soler and Sergio Busquets all failed to convert as Morocco ran out 3-0 winners in the shoot-out, with the latter duo seeing their efforts saved by Yassine Bounou.

Spain have now lost four of their five penalty shoot-outs at the World Cup, more than any other side in the history of the tournament, with their latest loss throwing the future of Luis Enrique - whose contract is set to expire after the competition - into doubt.

However, the former Barcelona boss says he will take time to consider his future, adding he is happy with the support he has received from the Spanish Football Federation (RFEF).

Asked whether he would stay on after the game, he responded: "I cannot tell you, I don't know this decision. This is not the right time to discuss my future, it's not relevant."

"My contract is going to end, but I am very happy with the national team, with the federation, and I have always had great support from (Jose Francisco) Molina, who is the sporting director."

"I could always carry on. I need to have peace of mind to decide what's best for me and the team."

The Spain coach also stood by his players, and his philosophy, following their World Cup exit. Spain racked up 1019 passes over 120 minutes of domination but a glaring lack of cutting edge stunted their attempts to find a goal with the game going to a penalty shoot-out in which Pablo Sarabia,

Carlos Soler and Sergio Busquets all missed. Luis Enrique insisted he was happy with the way his team played and stood by his style of football.

"We dominated but lacked a goal," he said. "We created chances, we were progressive but we met an opponent who performed to a high level."

"We could've created more and been more efficient but I was happy with my team. They represent me and represent my style and I can only praise them. I am very happy with the profile of the players I have in my squad, I would not change them, I would go with them till the end."

If anyone is responsible it's me. This is sport, there is no point in punishing ourselves."

Luis Enrique also had words of praise for Sarabia, Soler and Busquets for having the courage to take a spot-kick in front of an intimidating pro-Morocco support at Education City Stadium.

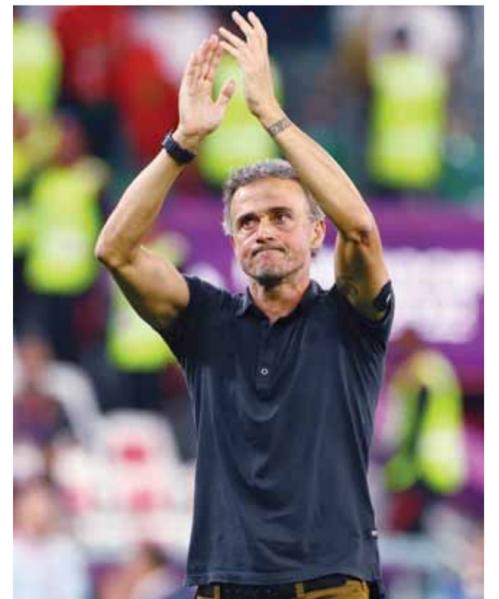
He added: "We created enough chances to win the match but the end [the shoot-out] was not a lottery."

"You have to control yourself and be brave in managing that. I would select the same players to do it. Sarabia, Soler and Busquets were great, they missed, no problem - it's part of the sport."

Luis Enrique was gracious in defeat, praising Morocco's overall performance, but reserved special words for goalkeeper Yassine Bounou, who plays his club football for Sevilla. Bounou saved the efforts of Soler and Busquets while Sarabia hit the post having gone first, leaving Madrid-born Achraf Hakimi to win it for Morocco to put them into the quarter-finals for the first time.

"Bounou was the man of the match and he's a top goalkeeper," added the former Barcelona boss.

"He's a great person as I know first hand. He was decisive in the shoot-out and deserved to be the man of the match."



Spain's coach Luis Enrique waves to supporters after his team lost the Qatar 2022 World Cup Round of 16 match against Morocco at the Education City Stadium on Tuesday. (Reuters)

Bottom Line



Flick to remain Germany coach

AFP
Berlin

Germany coach Hansi Flick will keep his job and lead the team at Euro 2024 despite their crushing World Cup disappointment, the German Football Association (DFB) said yesterday.

"We have full confidence in Hansi Flick that he will master this challenge together with his team," Bernd Neundorff, president of the DFB, said in a statement after a crisis meeting with Flick.

The move means Flick, 57, will get the chance to seek redemption at the Euros on home soil in Germany.

"My coaching team and I are optimistic about the European Championship in our own country," Flick said.

"We as a team can achieve much more than we showed in Qatar. We missed a great opportunity there," he added.

"We will learn our lessons from this."

Flick took over as Germany coach from former mentor Joachim Loew after the European Championship in 2021.

He had previously served as deputy to Loew in Germany's 2014 World Cup triumph as well as leading Bayern Munich to a treble in 2020.

He made a flying start to the



In this file photo taken on November 29, 2022 Germany's head coach Hans-Dieter Flick leads a training session of his team at the Al Shamal Stadium during the Qatar 2022 World Cup. (AFP)

job with eight wins, leaving Germany confident heading into the tournament in Qatar.

However, the four-time World Cup winners crashed out in the group stages after losing to Japan in their opening game.

Flick had said on the night that he wanted to remain in the job and see out his contract.

However, the same was true of team director Oliver Bierhoff,

who nevertheless went on to stand aside earlier this week - much to Flick's disappointment.

Speculation had since been rife that Flick may also resign.

He will now be faced with the task of leading Germany to victory at the European Championship without his close confidant.

With regard to Bierhoff's successor, Neundorff said the DFB

had agreed to "first discuss the future structure of this area of responsibility within the DFB and then make a personnel decision".

Flick helped mastermind a golden era as Loew's assistant coach for eight years up until 2014, culminating with Germany's World Cup win in Brazil.

After leaving the German Football Association (DFB) in

2017, he then became a coaching star in his own right thanks to a whirlwind spell in charge of Bayern Munich.

In just 18 months at the helm of Germany's biggest club, Flick racked up seven trophies, including a historic Bundesliga, German Cup and Champions League treble in the 2019/20 season.

His success at Bayern Munich and historic ties to the DFB made him strong favourite to take over the national team after Loew announced he would end a 15-year reign following the delayed Euro 2020.

In 19 international matches under Flick's leadership so far, Germany have 11 wins, six draws and two defeats - including the painful loss to Japan in Qatar.

Born in 1965, Flick enjoyed a short but successful playing career, winning four Bundesliga titles with Bayern Munich in the late 1980s.

After injuries forced the midfielder to retire at 28, he had spells coaching lower-league clubs, and notably kickstarted Hoffenheim's eventual rise to the Bundesliga with promotion from the fourth to the third tier in 2011.

Yet it was as Loew's assistant from 2006 to 2014 that Flick gained national fame, helping Germany to five successive semi-final appearances at major tournaments.

Martinez taking pain-killing injections for ankle issue, says agent

Argentina striker Lautaro Martinez has been having pain-killing injections in his ankle to play at the World Cup in Qatar, his agent Alejandro Camacho said. Martinez started Argentina's stunning opening group stage loss to Saudi Arabia - where he had a couple of goals disallowed for offside - and also their win over Mexico. But the Inter Milan player only came on in the final minutes against Poland in their last group match and against Australia in the last 16, prompting local media to raise questions about his physical condition. "Lautaro has been taking injections because he has a lot of pain in his ankle," Camacho told Argentine radio station La Red. "He's working hard to make that pain go away, and as soon as that happens, he'll be flying on the pitch. Martinez is a top player in the world. He is very strong in the mind, but the goals that were disallowed against Saudi Arabia were hard moments for him." Martinez has seen his starting spot in the Argentine lineup taken by Manchester City striker Julian Alvarez, who has scored two goals so far. "The competition makes him (Martinez) and Julian stronger, because contrary to what you might think, they are good for each other," Camacho added. Argentina take on the Netherlands in the quarter-finals tomorrow.

Spotlight

Gvardiol leading Croatia's new generation in Qatar

The 20-year-old centre-back has played every minute of Croatia's four matches so far, putting in brilliant performances



Croatia's Marko Livaja (second left) and Josko Gvardiol (right) during training at Al Erssal Training Site 3, Doha, Qatar, yesterday. (Reuters)

AFP
Doha

The Qatar World Cup was billed as a last chance for Croatia's ageing stars to win a major tournament, but the youngest player to feature for Zlatko Dalic's side, Josko Gvardiol, has been vital in their run to the quarter-finals.

Gvardiol's next test is the unenviable task of stopping Brazil's fearsome forward line in the last eight tomorrow.

The 20-year-old centre-back has played every minute of Croatia's four matches so far, putting in brilliant defensive performances in the goalless draw with Belgium and the tense penalty shootout win over Japan in the last 16.

Gvardiol has been linked with several of Europe's biggest clubs, including Real Madrid and Manchester United, after a breakthrough season last term for RB Leipzig.

He has further enhanced his reputation as a complete defender on football's biggest stage, despite wearing a protective face mask after suffering a broken nose last month.

The defender showed multiple facets of his game against Belgium when his team needed to avoid defeat to reach the knockout phase and dump out the world's second-ranked side.

Gvardiol delighted the crowd with one mazy dribble from inside his own half, although it was a last-ditch

sliding tackle to prevent Romelu Lukaku from scoring a late winner which proved crucial.

Last year, a teenage Gvardiol was criticised after being part of the side that lost 5-3 to Spain in an extra-time thriller at Euro 2020.

He particularly came under fire for mistiming a challenge and being left on the floor as Ferran Torres scored Spain's third goal.

Coach Dalic has been repaid for his faith in the youngster during the World Cup, as veteran Domagoj Vida, with 100 caps to his name, has been left watching from the bench.

"Josko was very young. We put our confidence and trust in him. He was playing for Leipzig and he did very well," said Dalic. "I believe that you can't be a good player without the support of the coach. He made mistakes and it's normal. He will mature. He will continue to make mistakes but in order to be a real player you need to adopt a certain attitude of rising above it. Josko has really justified our confidence."

'DIFFERENT OPPORTUNITIES'

Gvardiol has reportedly been closely followed by Real and several Premier League clubs, but this is the first time his qualities have been beamed to a wider audience.

His assuredness on the ball and turn of pace have made pundits and fans take notice.

"He has been my favourite defender to watch in the tournament so far," former Manchester United centre-back Rio Ferdinand told the BBC. "He has got a great presence, he is happy for the battles, very physical and has a wand for a left foot."

Gvardiol has put any previous mistakes from the Euro behind him and credits Croatia's much-vaunted midfield trio of Luka Modric, Mateo Kovacic and Marcelo Brozovic for protecting the defence. "It was different circumstances. Now I am facing different opportunities," he said. "When you come to the national team, where Kovacic, Brozovic and Luka Modric are the midfielders, half of your problems are resolved already. You have a lot less on your mind."

Seven of Croatia's last eight knockout matches at major tournaments have gone to extra time and the 2018 World Cup runners-up would probably accept penalties against five-time champions Brazil. "I would prefer the senior players to take the penalties but of course if the situation arises and I'm asked to take one, I'm not scared of it," Gvardiol added.

If he can keep Neymar, Richarlison, Raphinha and Vinicius Junior at bay at Education City Stadium, Gvardiol would prove Croatia have a bright future even after Modric and co hang up their boots.

Focus

Belgium star Hazard quits international football

AFP
Doha

Belgium star Eden Hazard announced his retirement from international football yesterday, days after the team crashed out of the World Cup in the group stage.

The Real Madrid forward, 31, made the announcement on social media, saying "a page turns today".

"Thank you for your unparalleled support," he posted on Instagram. "Thank you for all this happiness shared since 2008. I have decided to put an end to my international career. The succession is ready. I will miss you."

The Belgium team tweeted: "All the best, captain."

Hazard, who played as an attacking midfielder or winger, made his Belgium debut in 2008 as a teenager and collected a total of 126 caps, scoring 33 goals.

He was the standard-bearer of Belgium's much-vaunted



In this file photo taken on November 27, 2022 Belgium's forward Eden Hazard blows kisses to supporters during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group F match against Morocco at the Al Thumama Stadium in Doha. Hazard, 31, yesterday announced his retirement from international football. (AFP)

30s and they finished third in Group F behind Morocco and Croatia.

Hazard, who was the team's skipper, made a surprise admission during the tournament in Qatar, saying the team's best chance to win the World Cup had come and gone.

The forward moved from French club Lille to Chelsea in 2012 and became one of the standout stars in the Premier League, winning the trophy twice.

He sealed a big-money move to Real Madrid in 2019 but, hampered by injury, has struggled to repeat the form he showed in England.

Belgium were stalked by rumours of in-fighting in Qatar and a number of the country's other stars including Kevin De Bruyne and Thibaut Courtois have likely played their final World Cup matches.

In the aftermath of their exit, Belgium coach Roberto Martinez announced he was leaving his job.

The team are still ranked second in the world by FIFA but many of their players are in their

"golden generation", which reached the semi-finals at the 2018 World Cup in Russia.

Motor Sport

F1: Qatar among six to host sprint races

Reuters
London

Azerbaijan's Baku City circuit will host the first of Formula One's six sprint races next season, the sport said yesterday.

The others will be held in Austria, at Belgium's Spa-Francorchamps, Qatar, Austin's Circuit of the Americas and Brazil's Interlagos.

Azerbaijan's race weekend is April 28-30, with the Austrian race at Spielberg from June 30 to July 2. Spa is July 28-30, Qatar Oct 6-8, Austin Oct 20-22 and Brazil Nov 3-5.

Baku, Spa, Qatar and Austin will be hosting sprints for the first time.

Qatar was absent from this year's calendar due to the country hosting the soccer World Cup.

Formula One is doubling the number of sprint race weekends, with three held this year at Italy's Imola, in Austria and Brazil.

The sprint format involves qualifying on Friday for a 100km race on Saturday, with points awarded to the top eight, that sets the grid for the main Grand Prix on Sunday.

Pole position is awarded to the fastest driver in Friday qualifying rather than who starts Sunday's race at the front of the grid.

The same format will continue next year, al-

though Formula One is considering changes for the future including turning Saturday into a stand-alone race.

Formula One said the choice of locations was based on research into which tracks offered the best overtaking opportunities, close racing and high-speed sections.

"We have seen a hugely positive reaction to the F1 Sprint events during the first two years of its running," said F1 chief executive Stefano Domenicali.

"The introduction of the F1 Sprint has created a race weekend that includes three days of competitive racing action and brings more entertainment to fans of the sport as well as additional value for key stakeholders including teams, broadcasters, partners, and host venues."

Baku promoter Arif Rahimov said in May that he wanted to host a sprint weekend to create more excitement.

"We're a market where most of the fans are not as educated in the sport itself so when you say that we have two races...that will definitely increase the attendance on a Saturday and give them more value for money," he said then.

"I'm a big proponent of it. I really like the idea. I think it's good just to mix things around a little bit throughout the years. Things get boring and people just get too used to the same format and then they lose their interest."



A file photo from the inaugural Formula One race staged at the Losail International Circuit last year in November. @lusalircuit

Chavez tops latest most powerful FIFA World Cup goal ranking

Doha: With technology playing a prominent role in the 2022 FIFA World Cup Qatar, and interest in data ever-growing, fans and media are now able to validate another long-debated fact: who hit the most 'powerful' goal? Al Rihla, adidas' official match ball for Qatar 2022 with connected ball technology, features an inertial measurement unit (IMU) placed inside the centre of the ball.

This sensor sends ball data to the video operation room 500 times per second, allowing a very precise detection of the kick point.

This technology also allows the ability to detect the distance the ball travelled to the goal in the air; speed of the shot; as well as amount of spin.

Leading the Top 10 goals from the Group Stage and Round of 16 combined is Luis Chavez's spectacular free-kick, in Mexico's 2-1 win over Saudi Arabia. The distance to goal was 29.19m, with a top speed of 121.69kph. The distance to goal is measured from where the ball is kicked, to the centre of the goal - straight line, not flight



path. Ritsu Doan's 120.04kph strike for Japan from just outside the box to make it 1-1 against Spain is currently the second fastest shot that led to a goal, with Germany's Niclas Fullkrug's goal - also against La Roja - in third place.

Cristiano Ronaldo's opener in Portugal's 3-2 win over Ghana from the penalty spot, and Harry Kane's goal against Senegal complete the Top Five so far.

The average spin rate of the fastest shots varies from 146 rps to 6.21 rps showing a significant variance in this new metric too. Kane's shot showed the lowest spin rate (1.46 rps) of this ranking.

Hakim Ziyech of Morocco leads the table for goals by 'distance travelled'.

His fourth minute goal against Canada in the group stage was struck 32.85m from goal.



Spotlight



Ronaldo a bystander as Portugal find magic touch

The superstar forward was largely a spectator as the side he has captained for so long threw off the shackles and romped to victory over Switzerland in the last 16 match

AFP
Doha

Cristiano Ronaldo first found himself unloved and unwanted by Manchester United.

Now the unthinkable has happened — he has been dumped by Portugal. The superstar forward was largely a spectator as the side he has captained for so long threw off the shackles and romped to a 6-1 victory over Switzerland in the World Cup last-16 on Tuesday.

Young striker Goncalo Ramos, brought in for Ronaldo, scored a stunning hat-trick and at least competed with his illustrious teammate for the headlines.

Ronaldo came to the World Cup seeking respite after his troubled spell at Old Trafford this season, where he had become a peripheral figure under new manager Erik ten Hag.

Those frustrations boiled over last month in an explosive TV interview in which he lashed out at the club and the coach, leading to an inevitable parting of the ways.

The 37-year-old landed in Qatar to the usual fanfare, once again the focus of fawning attention from the world's media.

Things even went to script in Portugal's first game, when he scored the opener from the penalty spot in a 3-2 win against Ghana, becoming the first man to score goals at five World Cups.

But things went downhill from there. He huffed and puffed through games against Uruguay and South Korea but failed to find the net and Portugal were less than the sum of their considerable parts.

Portugal coach Fernando Santos, who masterminded the side's triumph at Euro 2016, finally took the decision to leave his star man out against the Swiss and was vindicated in spectacular fashion.

Portugal turned on the style, with Benfica's Ramos, 21, netting three times in a free-flowing attacking performance.

RONALDO CHANTS

With the match long since won, chants of "Ronaldo" echoed around the cavernous Lusail Stadium in Doha and he was cheered as he warmed up on the



Portugal coach Fernando Santos (standing) reacts as Cristiano Ronaldo (sitting, second right) looks on from the substitute bench during the round of 16 match against Switzerland at the Lusail Stadium, on Tuesday. (Reuters)

Dropping Ronaldo purely 'strategic': Santos

Portugal coach Fernando Santos said his decision to leave Cristiano Ronaldo out of his team for Tuesday's 6-1 triumph over Switzerland in the World Cup last 16 had been "strategic and nothing more."

Santos had expressed his unhappiness with Ronaldo's reaction to being suspended in the final group stage game against South Korea but he said that matter had no impact.

"I said that it was closed and it was closed. Cristiano Ronaldo is one of the best players in the world playing professionally and as a captain...so we have to just think about this team collectively," he said. Asked whether it was the most difficult

decision of his career to leave out Ronaldo, Santos said: "I have a very close relationship I always have, known him since he was 19 at Sporting, and then for years here in the national squad," he said.

"Ronaldo and I never confuse the human and personal aspect with the coach and player relationship. He is a very important player to have in the team," he said.

Santos said he expected a "very difficult" game against Morocco in the quarter-finals but said his team were clearly in good form. "If we can continue like this and improve some things then that is a good path," he added. (AFP)

sidelines. Santos gave the crowd what they wanted with about 15 minutes of normal time to go. Ronaldo smashed a free-kick into the wall moments after coming on and minutes later had the ball in the net after a fine finish, but was well off-side.

He even had to cede the limelight to fellow substitute Rafael Leao, who scored a stunning goal in stoppage time to complete the rout — another glimpse of the enviable riches at Santos' disposal.

The coach, who has been in charge since 2014, insisted he

had complete faith in all his forwards in the aftermath of the win, which sets up a quarter-final against Morocco. "Andre (Silva) is a great player who plays further forward, Cristiano is more fixed — he stays in a more determined area towards the box," he said. "Goncalo (Ramos)

has different characteristics. "He is very dynamic and that is what he ended up showing us. It is nothing new — he already came on in two matches but Andre also played in the last match. "I have three players I fully trust. For each match I will use which player I see best for my strategy."

Santos even suggested five-time Ballon d'Or winner Ronaldo could still be a starter in Qatar. But for all of his coach's placatory words, Ronaldo — who has a record 118 goals in men's international football — will surely once again be left out of the line-up for Saturday's quarter-final.

He will also be painfully aware that he is clubless, as rumours swirl over a lucrative move to Saudi side Al-Nassr. If, as expected, he is kicking his heels on the bench during the Morocco match, he will have plenty of time to brood over his situation and remember he was the future once.

Head to Head

Dutch skipper Van Dijk dodges Messi questions

Reuters
Doha

Virgil van Dijk deflected several questions about his looming confrontation with Lionel Messi but admitted the Netherlands would be cautious in their approach against Argentina in tomorrow's World Cup quarter-final.

The Dutch skipper stuck to the same line in fielding a flurry of enquiries about how he and his teammates will deal with the threat of Messi at the Lusail Stadium.

"It's not about me, or the Netherlands, against Messi, it's about the Netherlands against Argentina," he repeated several times at a news conference yesterday.

In response to a question about how worried they might be about the threat of the seven-times Ballon d'Or winner, van Dijk said: "Worried no, but cautious of what Argentina can bring to the game."

"They are a fantastic team with fantastic players, and we are going to have to do well in all departments of the match."

He agreed that his side could have played better in Qatar, despite not losing a game and winning their group, but diplomatically dodged a question

about whether criticism of their performances back home was typically Dutch.

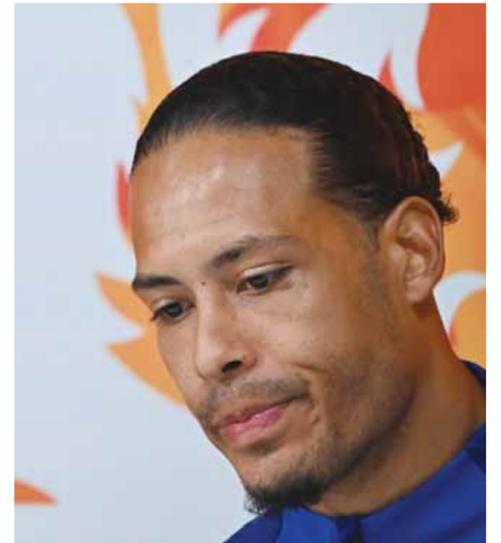
"We also feel that our play in the last game could have been better," he said. "We are all perfectionists and could like to have performed better. But what is nice is that we are still in the competition and playing in the quarter-finals."

The Dutch are eager to break new ground and win a World Cup after losing in three finals. "There is a hunger, dreams and a feeling that we really want to get it (the World Cup)," van Dijk said.

"When you are in the quarter-finals you are only three games from glory. This is our opportunity. But obviously we have to get past an Argentina side with one of the best players of all time."

The Dutch also face the possibility of the majority of the 80,000-odd crowd cheering on Argentina as a surprisingly small number of orange-clad Dutch supporters have travelled. Usually, the Dutch get significant support on the road but without them, van Dijk believes an early goal might be important to quieten the opposing fans.

"Then it comes a whole different game," he said. "But I think it will be nice to play in such an ambiance."



Netherlands' defender Virgil van Dijk addresses a press conference at the Qatar University training site in Doha, yesterday. (AFP)

Focus



Hero Ramos 'never dreamt' of Cup hat-trick

AFP
Doha

Portugal's hat-trick hero Goncalo Ramos said he had not even dreamt of starting a World Cup knockout match, let alone scoring three in his first start in the tournament.

The 21-year-old striker was handed a surprise start ahead of five-times Ballon d'Or winner Cristiano Ronaldo and rewarded coach Fernando Santos with a brilliant match-winning display.

"Not even in my wildest dreams did I think of making my first start in a World Cup knockout game and scoring three goals," he said.

"But we have to think game by game and prepare for the game (quarter-final with Morocco). This result doesn't matter now. We're going to go all out in the next game."

Ramos was only two years old when Ronaldo made his debut for Portugal and has often spoken of his admiration for the 37-year-old.

The man of the match at the Lusail Stadium was asked how the dressing room — and Ronaldo — had reacted to the surprise team selection from Santos.

"Honestly no one in the team talked about it. Cristiano, as captain, did what he does, he



Portugal's Goncalo Ramos celebrates scoring their fifth goal and his hat-trick against Switzerland in their round of 16 match at Lusail Stadium on Tuesday. (Reuters)

helped, he talked to us, not only to myself but to my teammates," he said. "Cristiano Ronaldo has always been a role

model, he is an idol for many. I also like (Robert) Lewandowski and (Zlatan) Ibrahimovic," he added. Ramos was only making

his fourth appearance for the national side, having played ten minutes across two games in the group stage.

He only made his debut on November 17 in a pre-World Cup friendly against Nigeria, coming on as a 67th minute substitute and promptly scoring 15 minutes later with the fourth goal in a 4-0 win.

Born in Algarve, the forward has burst onto the scene with Benfica this season after being given an enhanced role as the central striker following the sale of Darwin Nunez to Liverpool.

He has scored 14 goals in 21 games in all competitions, quickly adjusting to his new role. "My favourite position is forward, but last year I was asked to play in support of Darwin. It's clear that with his departure a space opened up for me. It's great to now have the role that I love the most," he said in a recent interview.

Should he continue his impressive impact on this Portugal side in the quarter-final against Morocco he would surely find himself a target of the same kind of big money approach that saw Nunez leave.

But for now his thoughts are purely on contributing to Santos' increasingly impressive side and he isn't even taking his starting role for granted.

"That is something that doesn't concern me. I always work to the fullest and hopefully that is evident," he said.

Diamond League returns to London in 2023 with finals in Eugene

The series starts in Doha on May 5

AFP
Paris

The 2023 Diamond League will be the biggest yet with 15 events scheduled, including a return to London and the finals to be held for the first time in Eugene, the organisers announced yesterday.

Two meetings of the elite athletics one-day track and field series are slated to take place in China — in Shenzhen and Shanghai — even though the country has cancelled all international sporting events since the start of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

Silesia, in Poland, which was added to the programme this year to make up for the loss of Chinese events, officially joins the circuit for the next five years.

The series, which starts in Doha on May 5, will return to London after a three-year hiatus, with the London Stadium hosting the event

on July 23. For the first time ever, the Diamond League Final will take place not in Zurich or Brussels, but on US soil at the Prefontaine Classic.

Eugene, Oregon which staged this year's athletics world championships will host the 2023 season finale, with all 32 Diamond League champions to be crowned across two days of elite athletics action on September 16 and 17.

Diamond League 2023 programme:

May 5: Doha (Qatar); **May 28:** Rabat (Morocco); **June 2:** Rome (Italy); **June 9:** Paris (France); **June 15:** Oslo (Norway); **June 30:** Lausanne (Switzerland);

July 2: Stockholm (Sweden); **July 16:** Silesia (Poland); **July 21:** Monaco; **July 23:** London (United Kingdom); **July 29:** Shanghai (China); **August 3:** Shenzhen (China); **August 31:** Zurich (Switzerland); **September 8:** Brussels (Belgium); **September 16/17:** Eugene (USA).

Focus ◆◆◆◆◆

The defences that could decide the title

FIFA World Cups tend to be won by the sturdiest teams rather than the most spectacular. So how do the Qatar 2022 quarter-finalists measure up?

History proves that clean sheets are key to FIFA World Cup success

The last six winners have kept 17 of them in 24 knockout matches

We look at the Qatar 2022 quarter-finalists and the defences on which hopes are pinned

Portugal

Group-stage goals conceded | 4
Knockout goals conceded | 1



Case for the defence: Statistically, their quarter-final meeting with Morocco pits the tournament's best defence against its worst. The truth, inevitably, is a little more nuanced, with Portugal's back four anchored by the evergreen Pepe and a centre-back, in Ruben Dias, widely recognised to be among the world's best.

For what it's worth, Portugal also shipped four goals in the group stage of their triumphant UEFA EURO 2016 campaign and went on to lift the trophy following knockout-stage shutouts against Croatia, Wales and hosts France. Coincidence? Or another example of football history repeating itself? The coming days in Qatar will reveal all.

Netherlands

Group-stage goals conceded | 1
Knockout goals conceded | 1



Case for the defence: Louis van Gaal has again put his faith in the three-centre-back system that proved so effective for him at Brazil 2014, with similarly encouraging early results.

The Dutch also possess higher-calibre individual defenders than they had in that bronze-winning squad eight years ago. Captain Virgil van Dijk is considered by many to be peerless in his position, while the fine form of Nathan Ake and Jurrien Timber alongside him has left Matthijs de Ligt - one of the most expensive defenders of all time - warming the Oranje bench.

Morocco

Group-stage goals conceded | 1
Knockout goals conceded | 0



Case for the defence: This is not a tough one to make. Nor is it by accident that the Atlas Lions, who have already kept clean sheets against the heavyweight European trio of Belgium, Croatia and Spain, boast the best defensive record at Qatar 2022.

The level of organisation and team spirit they have displayed is all the more remarkable as coach Walid Regragui had just three months to mould them into the disciplined outfit we see here in Qatar. In their eight matches since he has taken charge, the Atlas Lions have conceded just once - and that was an own goal, a cruelly deflected Canadian cross.

Even the prolific Portuguese, this World Cup's joint-leading scorers (12), are sure to find the Moroccans a tough nut to crack.

France

Group-stage goals conceded | 2
Knockout goals conceded | 1



Case for the defence: On paper, Les Bleus' rearguard could be considered the leakiest of the eight remaining sides, having conceded in all four matches at Qatar 2022. It's worth bearing in mind, though, that their goals-against column made for even more worrying reading at this stage of Russia 2018 - and that they proceeded to advance to the final via back-to-back clean sheets.

Given the quality contained within their back four, don't bet against that old adage about form being temporary and class permanent being borne for a second successive edition.

Argentina

Group-stage goals conceded | 2
Knockout goals conceded | 1



Case for the defence: Ok, so that opening-match defeat wasn't a great start. Saudi Arabia's second-half goals were both preventable, and the Argentina centre-backs looked leaden-footed for the first in particular.

But like the team as a whole, those Albiceleste defenders have responded well to that stunning setback. Lionel Messi identified Nicolas Otamendi and Cristian Romero as the team's top performers in their last-16 win over Australia and, but for a massive deflection to a speculative, off-target shot by Craig Goodwin, they would be heading into the last eight on a run of three consecutive clean sheets.

Brazil

Group-stage goals conceded | 1
Knockout goals conceded | 1



Case for the defence: It could justifiably be argued that Brazil have yet to concede a goal that truly matters at this World Cup. Yes, their defence - like the wider team - disappointed against Cameroon, and looked vulnerable to crosses in particular. But a place in the last 16 was already secure and Tite had rested his first-choice back four.

In the last 16, they conceded when 4-0 up and cruising - and it would be harsh in the extreme to blame Thiago Silva and Co for a 30-yard screamer. All the same, while Paik Seung-ho's piledriver can be filed in the unstoppable category, and came at a stage when Brazil were long since out of sight, Alisson was required to make a few more saves - outstanding saves, too - than Tite would have been comfortable with.

Croatia

Group-stage goals conceded | 1
Knockout goals conceded | 1



Case for the defence: Case for the defence: Conceding just twice in four games, given the strength of their group and the success their last-16 opponents enjoyed in scoring against Germany and Spain, is no mean feat.

The fact that Croatia twice recovered from conceding the first goal to prevail in matches - first again Canada, then Japan - also speaks for their defensive composure and strength of character. It's worth noting, too, that in the masked Josko Gvardiol - labelled "the best central defender in the world" by coach Zlatko Dalic - they boast one of the tournament's outstanding performers thus far.

England

Group-stage goals conceded | 2
Knockout goals conceded | 0



Case for the defence: England arrived at this World Cup having kept just one clean sheet in their previous six matches, and with their manager under fire for continuing to pick the out-of-form Harry Maguire.

Southgate has, of course, been vindicated for that show of faith, with Maguire one of the outstanding players in a team that has conceded just two goals - each of which arrived against IR Iran when the score was, respectively, 4-0 and 6-1 in the Three Lions' favour. The fact that three straight shutouts have followed is offering England fans genuine reason for optimism.





Spotlight

'Mr Avocado Head' has Morocco daring to dream

'WE FOUGHT AND MADE THE MOROCCAN PEOPLE HAPPY. WE MADE HISTORY AND MOROCCO DESERVES IT'

Reuters
Doha

Thanks to Walid Regragui, the coach who has made Morocco the first Arab nation to reach the World Cup quarter-finals, avocados may just be the nation's favourite fruit.

When the appointment of Regragui following the departure of Bosnian Vahid Halilhodzic was announced in August, underwhelmed pundits branded him "avocado head" as a belittling term of derision.

But the shaved-headed coach, who teased those critics at the tournament in Qatar by holding an avocado with a soccer ball inside it and pointing his finger at his head, has more than proved his credentials.

The previously unheralded Regragui, who led Wydad in the Moroccan league and CAF Champions League double last season, masterminded a win for the ages against mighty Spain in the last 16 on Tuesday.

The Atlas Lions produced an amazing defensive performance, allowing Spain possession without threatening danger, before winning a penalty shootout to set up a last-eight clash with Portugal.

Morocco first grabbed attention at the World Cup with a goalless draw against Croatia, the runners-up four years ago.

The 47-year-old coach talked about how his team must devel-



Morocco's coach Walid Regragui (also right) celebrates after his team won the Qatar 2022 World Cup Round of 16 match against Spain at the Education City Stadium in Al Rayyan on Tuesday. (AFP)

op a winning mentality, and that Morocco would see how they fared against Belgium before their final group game against Canada. The Moroccans, however, stunned the second-ranked Belgians 2-0 to ease their passage to the last 16 for the second time in their history.

Following another victory over Canada, Regragui became the first Arab coach to lead a team to the knockout rounds.

"I told (my players) we should

be proud of ourselves," Regragui said. "It is an opportunity that may not be repeated. Unfortunately, I did not play in the World Cup. God has now given me an opportunity to make history as a coach. I am the happiest person in the world," he said.

"I think Africans can go far, why not dream of winning the cup? We want the next generation to dare to dream."

From the first minute against Spain, those familiar with Mo-

roccan football felt that the 2010 world champions had a long night ahead of them.

USUAL MIXTURE

Regragui relied on the usual mixture of North African style, combining committed defence with counter-attacks led by Hakim Ziyech, who returned to the national team when Regragui took over from Halilhodzic.

But Regragui's importance extends far beyond on-field



tactics. He gives his team confidence and motivates them in his own unique way.

Regragui has managed to convince his players they are playing for all of Morocco and, as a result, the team camp has been different from before. Regragui decided to invite the players' families to the camp in Qatar.

"I lived my life in Paris, but it was the first time that I attended a tournament with Walid par-

ticipating, whether as a player or a coach," Regragui's mother told the Moroccan TV station Arryadia.

Although 14 of the 26 players in the Moroccan squad were born abroad, their love for their country is clear.

"We fought and made the Moroccan people happy. We made history and Morocco deserves it. The Moroccan people made us united on the field," Regragui

told Bein Sports. It is possible to feel the warmth between Regragui and his players during training as he treats them like friends.

"They like to hit me on the head," Regragui said. "Maybe it brings them good luck?"

At Al Thumama Stadium on Saturday, the Moroccan, Arab and African world will hope to continue the avocado-inspired fairytale against Portugal.

Focus

Nerveless Hakimi fires Morocco into uncharted territory

AFP
Doha

If Achraf Hakimi was feeling the weight of expectation on his shoulders as he stepped up to take a history-making penalty for Morocco against Spain, he did not show it.

The defender showed nerves of steel to dink the ball over goalkeeper Unai Simon and seal a 3-0 shootout win over the hapless Spaniards, after the match finished goalless on Tuesday.

The Madrid-born Paris Saint-Germain player steered Morocco into uncharted territory, with the north African side becoming the first from the Arab world to reach the last eight at a World Cup. Wild celebrations erupted in Morocco and across Europe as the diaspora rejoiced, from Paris to Brussels to Barcelona, while other African and Arab countries felt buoyed by their success.

Although coach Walid Regragui prefers to credit the team rather than individuals, Hakimi is one of his standout players.

A dynamic, explosive presence, he is fond of lung-bursting sprints to join the attack, while maintaining discipline in defence. Hakimi trained with Spain at youth level, before deciding to pledge his allegiance to the country of his parents.

"I also went to the Spanish national team to try it," he told Spanish newspaper Marca before the game.

"I was at Las Rozas for a couple of days and I saw that it wasn't the right place for me, I didn't feel at home.

"It wasn't because of anything in particular, but for what I felt, because it was not what I had at home, which is the Arab culture, being Moroccan. I wanted to be here."

Those family bonds have played an important role in sustaining Morocco's historic charge. A photograph of Hakimi, 24, kissing his mother in the stands after their 2-0 group stage win over Belgium made waves on social media.

The team's families have been allowed to stay in close proximity and it lets the players feel the love which in many cases led to them choosing to play for Morocco. As well as Hakimi, several other players were born elsewhere but opted for the North African nation.

"For me, my mum is the most impor-



Morocco's defender Achraf Hakimi (centre) celebrates with teammates after converting the last penalty during the penalty shootout to win the Qatar 2022 World Cup Round of 16 match against Spain at the Education City Stadium in Al Rayyan on Tuesday. (AFP)

tant thing in my life," an elated Sofiane Boufal - born in Paris - said after beating Spain. "Of course (she was crying), the emotions in this game make you crazy. The support of your family is the most important thing."

Hakimi came from a modest family, living in the Madrid suburb of Getafe. His mother cleaned houses, while his father was a street vendor.

"I fight every day for them," said Hakimi in 2018. "They sacrificed themselves for me, they deprived my brothers of many things, for me to succeed."

Hakimi made his Morocco debut back

in 2016, while still a Real Madrid player, winning the Champions League with Los Blancos but never fully establishing himself.

He was loaned for two years to Borussia Dortmund and then signed permanently for Inter Milan. After a strong season in Italy, winning Serie A, PSG snapped him up in 2021.

With a Ligue 1 title in his pocket, Hakimi arrived with Morocco at the World Cup willing to perform the job the team needed him to do despite his star status.

Hakimi has occasionally thrived in Qatar, setting up Youssef En-Nesyri with

a perfectly weighted pass against Canada, but has also helped form part of the strongest defence at the World Cup.

Morocco's only goal conceded came in that 2-1 win over Canada, while they shut out 2018 runners-up Croatia, plus fancied Belgium and Spain.

Winger Hakim Ziyech has also drawn praise after returning from a period of exile due to a falling out with the previous coach, but through thick and thin, Hakimi has been there for his country.

Now, packed densely into stadiums in Doha and supporting from afar, Hakimi's people are there for him too.



France won't focus on particular England players, says Konate

France will not focus on any particular player when they take on England in a mouth-watering World Cup quarter-final on Saturday, defender Ibrahima Konate said.

England have an impressive midfield and can rely on the in-form Harry Kane up front, but danger can come from anywhere and the defending champions will not obsess over the Tottenham Hotspur striker. "Kane is a great player. I've played against him several times," Liverpool centre back Konate told a news conference yesterday.

"We have to look at the whole team, not just one player. If we play together, and stay compact we can do well. I would not target a single player.

"Soccer is not played with one, two or four players. We have to talk about the collective, how to mess with them collectively. It's the coach's job to show us what we don't see."

Konate's point of view is all the more understandable given that eight different England players have scored a total of 12 goals in their first four games.

On the other hand, Kylian Mbappe has scored five of France's nine goals with Olivier Giroud netting three, making the threats more identifiable for England coach Gareth Southgate.

Midfielder Adrien Rabiot, however, does not believe it is a problem for Les Bleus.

"We're not dependent on Kylian. We just know that 80-90% of our goals will come from him as he can also deliver assists, and our job is to put him in the best conditions for that," the Juventus player, the only other French player to score in Qatar, said.

Mbappe did not take part in Tuesday's group training session, but the French federation said he was doing recovery work on his own, adding that this was normal two days after a game.

"Yesterday was a short session, there is nothing to worry about, he was doing some work inside," said Konate.

(AFP)