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Spotlight

Morocco 'Rocky Balboa of this World Cup': Regragui

'We're becoming the team that everyone loves at this World Cup'

AFP
Doha

Morocco coach Walid Regragui said his side are "the Rocky Balboa of this World Cup" after the Atlas Lions became the first African team ever to reach the semi-finals with a stunning victory over Portugal on Saturday.

The injury-hit North Africans held on for a 1-0 victory at Al Thumama Stadium to set up a last-four clash against with holders France, after Youssef En-Nesyri's headed goal late in the first half. The win over Portugal came after knocking out Spain in the last 16 on penalties and beating the world's second-ranked team Belgium in the group stage.

"When you watch Rocky, you want to support Rocky Balboa because of his hard work and commitment and I think we're the Rocky Balboa of this World Cup," Regragui told reporters. "We're becoming the team that everyone loves at this World Cup, because we're showing that even if you don't have as much talent, if you show that desire, heart and belief, you can achieve. I'm sure many of you will say this is a miracle, but we've won without conceding against Belgium, Spain, Portugal and that's the result of hard work."

Morocco will take on either France on Wednesday at Al Bayt Stadium with the chance to become the first nation from outside Europe or South America to reach the final. "We can dream, why shouldn't we dream about winning the World Cup?" added Regragui, who only took over as coach in August.

"It doesn't cost you anything to have dreams. European countries have been used to winning the World Cup... We've played some really top sides, but so far we haven't achieved anything. Anyone who plays us now will have to be at the top of their game to beat us, it won't be easy for them, that's the message I'm trying to send out."


Morocco's coach Walid Regragui celebrates after his team win over Portugal in the Qatar 2022 World Cup quarter-finals at the Al Thumama Stadium on Saturday. *(AFP)*

Regragui said they can go even further in the tournament and continue making history as they seek to inspire future generations. "What's important for future generations is we've shown that it is possible for an African team to get to the semi-finals of the World Cup. Or even the final, why not?" an ecstatic Regragui told reporters.

"In one press conference three or four matches ago, I was asked we could win the World Cup. And I said, 'Why not?' We can dream. Why shouldn't we dream? If you don't dream, you don't get anywhere. It doesn't cost you anything."

Morocco had already surpassed expectations by becoming only the fourth African country and first Arab nation to reach the quarter-finals. But they managed to go one step further than Cameroon in 1990, Senegal's 2002 side and the Ghana team of 2010.

"We came up against a really great Portugal team. We're drawing on all we have, we still have guys injured. We have a mindset," Regragui said.

"I told all my players before the match we had to write history for Africa. I'm very, very happy."

Regragui, a France-born former Morocco international, had already made history of his own as the first African coach to take a team into the World Cup quarter-finals. Morocco were without injured defenders Noussair Mazraoui and Nayef Aguerd on Saturday, while captain Romain Saiss was stretchered off early in the second half.

"We're very proud because the players who did come in did a fantastic job," said Regragui. "We're a 26-man squad and to get far in this tournament we'll need all of them."

Morocco still have the best defensive record in the World Cup. The only time they have conceded in five matches was an own goal against Canada. "It's crazy. We're living a dream and we don't want to wake up. I have goosebumps," said winger Sofiane Boufal. "Everything we have, we deserve. We work hard. It's not over. There's still the semi-final and god willing, the final."

Morocco goalkeeper Yassine Bounou said his team's history-making campaign can show future generations from his country that they can create miracles. "We're in the same state as you... pinch me, I think I'm dreaming," Bounou told reporters. "These moments are great, but we're here to change the mentality. This feeling of inferiority... we have indeed changed this mentality, and the generation coming after us will know that Moroccan players can create miracles."

"It's really, really hard to find the words to describe this moment," he continued. "I want to thank my teammates for their hard work and our supporters who had our backs. Hopefully we can have some rest to prepare for what's coming next.

"I'd like to thank all the players who all made a stellar performance. We had injuries and all the players on the pitch were at the highest level."

Focus

Morocco's foreign-born contingent deliver in Qatar

Reuters
Doha

Morocco's unexpected march to the World Cup semi-finals can be attributed partly to a policy of deliberately seeking out talent in the Diaspora to strengthen the national team and give them a better chance of success.

Fourteen of Morocco's 26-man squad were born outside the country, more than any other team at the tournament in Qatar, providing an eclectic mix of players from growing migrant communities across Europe who have helped them break new ground.

The shock 1-0 quarter-final win over Portugal on Saturday made Morocco the first African and Arab country to reach the last four of a World Cup. Canadian-born goalkeeper Younes Bounou has conceded only one goal, Madrid-born Achraf Hakimi has been outstanding on the right flank, Dutch-born Sofyan Amrabat a powerful midfield enforcer and French-born Sofiane Boufal a menace on the left. Finding eligible players in countries like Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain is now a structured exercise, as opposed to the haphazard system when the first foreign-born Moroccans competed for the national team at the 1998 World Cup in France. Moroccans are one of the largest migrant populations in Europe, estimated at some 5mn, and have close ties with the country. A study by the Council of the Moroccan Community Abroad, a government agency, concluded that 61% of Moroccans in Europe between the ages of 18 and 35 visit the kingdom every year.


Morocco's Canadian-born goalkeeper Younes Bounou (second right) after making a save against Portugal at the Al Thumama Stadium on Saturday. *(Reuters)*

The Royal Moroccan Football Federation has talent scouts dotted around Europe and move quickly when there is a potential clash of loyalties. Dutch-born Hakim Ziyech had talks with both the Moroccans and Netherlands coach Ronald Koeman about which country he would commit his international future to before deciding on Morocco.

Amrabat, who like Ziyech represented the Netherlands at junior level, switched allegiance for family reasons. "My parents are Moroccan and my grandparents are Moroccan. Every time I go there I can't describe the feeling inside me in words, it's my home. The Netherlands is also my home, but Morocco is special," he said.

"The players are approached very early in order to attract them to the Moroccan side. We never force things, it's an honest discussion with the player and his family," explains Noureddine Moukrim, a youth coach in Belgium who scouted for Morocco for nine years.

But there are doubters about the policy, who feel this assiduous courting of overseas-born players retards opportunity for home-born footballers. "Before this World Cup we had a lot of problems about the guys born in Europe and guys not born in Morocco and a lot of journalists said, 'Why don't we play with guys born in Morocco?'," said coach Walid Regragui, himself a former foreign-born international.

"Today we have shown that every Moroccan is Moroccan. When he comes to the national team he wants to die, he wants to fight. As the coach, I was born in France, but nobody can have my heart for my country."

FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022

Morocco's historic feat in numbers

1 Morocco became the first African team to reach the semi-final of a FIFA World Cup after they beat Portugal.

6 Morocco extended their unbeaten streak at the FIFA World Cup to 6 games. This is the longest ever by an African team.

0 Morocco are yet to concede a goal from an opposing player in this tournament; the lone goal they conceded was an own goal vs Canada in the group stage.

2 Youssef En-Nesyri becomes the second Moroccan player to score in multiple games in the same World Cup (after Abdeljalil Hadda in 1998.) His goal was also the second header goal ever scored by Morocco in World Cups. The first? Also En Nesyri, against Spain in 2018.

3 Yassine Bounou (Bono) is the first African goalkeeper to record three clean sheets in a single edition of the World Cup.

41 Sofyan Amrabat has won possession 41 times at the 2022 World Cup so far, the most of any player in the tournament.

SPORT

FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022

Focus

Croatia's mental strength has deep roots: Petkovic



Croatia's players take part in a training session in Doha yesterday, ahead of their Qatar 2022 World Cup semi-final against Argentina. *(AFP)*

'I think we have improved with each game, as the opponents got stronger, we got better and better'

AFP
Doha

Croatia striker Bruno Petkovic says the team's mental strength that has propelled them to two penalty shoot-out wins at the World Cup has deep roots in the country's struggle for independence.

Petkovic scored a late equaliser to cancel out Neymar's opener for Brazil in the quarter-finals, before Zlatko Dalic's team held their nerve to win on spot kicks. They also beat Japan on penalties in the previous round.

It is a familiar pattern for Dalic's men, who four years ago reached the final via three extra-time wins in the knockout stage, two of them after shoot-outs.

"I think one of the reasons (for this mentality), is that we are a small country," Petkovic said yesterday. "Even though as players we are young, we know how our country was made and gained independence in the 1990s."

"We learned about this from our parents. We learned you fight, you work hard and you don't get anywhere without that," added the 28-year-old, who has become a national hero since his equaliser broke Brazilian hearts.

Some of the older players in the team have strong connections to the conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s. Veteran midfielder Luka Modric was displaced as a youngster and defender Dejan Lovren was forced out of his childhood home.

Croatia featured in their first World Cup as an independent nation in 1998 and reached the semi-final, where they lost to hosts and eventual winners France.

France also ended Croatian dreams four years ago in Russia, winning the final 4-2, but the country of four million people has its team back in the last four again and looking full of belief.

"I think we have improved with each game, as the opponents got stronger, we got better and better," said Petkovic. "For me, the goal gives me huge confidence. In the extra-time periods we still believed and we supported each other. The confidence is not only at a personal level, we believe in one another."

LOWER LEAGUES

Dinamo Zagreb striker Petkovic spent the early part of his career in Italy, playing mainly in the lower divisions, and did not feature in Dalic's squad four years ago. But he has strong memories of Croatia's run to the final, which included victory over England in the semis.

"I remember the semi-final in 2018, I was fifth or sixth-choice striker for Bologna and probably 78th choice for Croatia. I nearly left the preparation camp in Bologna to go to Moscow for the final," he said.

Petkovic believes there has been strong continuity despite the changes in the squad.

"The foundations were set then, the younger guys came into a well-organised machine," he said.

Without his goal though, there would have been no penalties, no Brazil exit and no semi-final to look forward and he says he is slowly realising the global impact of his strike.

"I am more and more aware of the magnitude of this goal with each passing day," he said.

"Maybe I will get this feeling again, we will see, maybe in the semi-final or final."

Spotlight

Pepe and Fernandes blast Argentine referee

AFP
Doha

Portugal players Pepe and Bruno Fernandes lashed out at the Argentine referee in charge of their 1-0 World Cup quarter-final defeat by Morocco on Saturday, claiming his nationality impacted the game.

Argentina progressed to the last four on Friday by beating the Netherlands and should they reach the final, might play against Morocco if they win their semi-final against England or France.

The match referee Facundo Tello, his two assistants and the video assistant referee were all from Argentina.

"It's unacceptable for an Argentine referee to referee our game," Pepe said on Portuguese television.

"After what happened yesterday, with (Lionel) Messi talking, all of Argentina talking, and the referee comes here.

"What did we play in the second half? The goalkeeper dropped to the ground. There were only eight minutes of stoppage time. We worked hard and the referee (only added on) eight minutes."

Messi had complained about the refereeing of Argentina's clash with the Dutch, saying too much time had been added on.

Portugal's main complaint was that too little time had been added in their clash with Morocco and they were critical of supposed time-wasting by the North African side in the second half. Bruno Fernandes complained that far more injury time should have been added, and that referees from teams still involved in the tournament should not be appointed to matches.

"We already know how it works... before the game we already knew what we were in for, and what kind of referee we would find," said Fernandes.

"Unfortunately, in these competitions, where there are no Portuguese referees, there are referees from teams that are still in the competition.

"It seems strange to me, to say the least, but I don't want to get into that, because that's not the only reason we lost.

"The referee gave two minutes of injury time in the first half and eight in the second. In this second half, the game was stopped, at minimum, for between 15 and 20 minutes."

Fernandes added: "We knew that we would play against much more than just Morocco."

The midfielder was left furious in the first half after not being awarded a penalty when he tumbled under a Moroccan player's challenge from behind.

"The (officials) are not used to this type of game and this tempo," added Fernandes.

"In the first half there is a clear penalty on me, without any doubt, because I'm by myself and never in my life let myself fall, when I was alone with the goalkeeper and could shoot on goal. It's as simple as that."

However, his coach Fernando Santos did not think the officials made a big difference in his team's elimination.

"I don't think so, I think he could have called for a foul on one or two (more) occasions but generally speaking I don't think so," said Santos.

"I think we could have done more and we didn't do so. I don't think we should blame the referee, it doesn't make sense."

The coach, who has a contract until after Euro 2024, said he would discuss his future in the days to come with the Portuguese football federation.

Manchester City's Ruben Dias believes the team still has plenty of potential as they contemplate the future with players such as Goncalo Ramos and Rafael Leao.

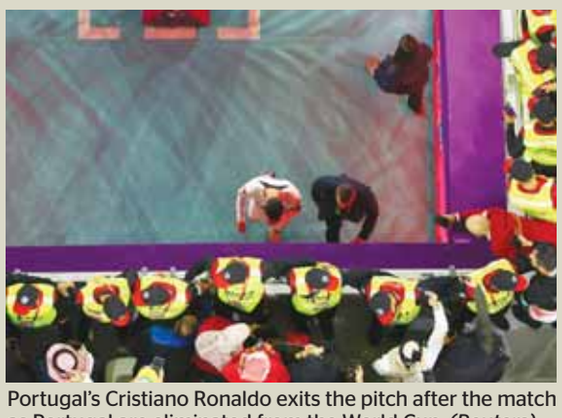
"Above all, it is important at this moment, despite the difficult of digesting (the defeat) to accumulate more experience," said Dias.

"We have a very young generation with a lot of quality and we have to have faith that nothing is lost."



Portugal's Pepe reacts during his team's quarter-final against Morocco at Al Thumama Stadium on Saturday. *(Reuters)*

RONALDO WON'T MAKE 'HEAT OF MOMENT' DECISION AFTER PORTUGAL EXIT



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo exits the pitch after the match as Portugal are eliminated from the World Cup. *(Reuters)*

Doha: Cristiano Ronaldo said yesterday "there's no point in reacting in the heat of the moment," as he responded to Portugal's World Cup elimination.

"To win a World Cup for Portugal was the biggest and most ambitious dream of my career. Fortunately, I won many titles of international dimension, including for Portugal," Ronaldo wrote on Instagram.

His post did not talk about international retirement but he started Portugal's last two matches in Qatar on the bench, a decision which provoked debate in Portugal and across the football world.

"Let's hope that time will be a good counsellor and allow everyone to draw their own conclusions," he wrote.

The post was accompanied by a photo of Ronaldo, head down, trudging off the field in Doha after the 1-0 quarter-final loss to Morocco on Saturday.

Ronaldo is without a club after a bitter divorce with Manchester United. According to the Portuguese press, Ronaldo threatened to leave the squad after he was dropped from the starting lineup, but coach Fernando Santos denied it.

"I just want everyone to know that a lot was said, a lot was written, a lot was speculated, but my dedication to Portugal didn't change for an instant," Ronaldo added.

"I was always one more player fighting for everyone's goal and I would never turn my back on my teammates and my country." In the five World Cups I played, always alongside great players and supported by millions of Portuguese, I gave it my all. I left everything on the field. I never turned my back on the fight and I never gave up on this dream. Unfortunately, yesterday the dream ended. The dream was beautiful while it lasted."

At 37, Ronaldo was playing his fifth World Cup. As soon as the final whistle blew he headed down the tunnel with tears streaming down his face.

Ronaldo, a five-times Ballon D'Or winner, arrived with a mission to prove he could still make a difference. He ended the tournament, however, as a bench player and had no impact as a substitute in his team's 1-0 quarter-final loss to Morocco.

In a Portugal team full of stand-out players, Ronaldo fell victim to the abundance of options that coach Santos had at his disposal.

Portugal's all-time leading scorer with 118 goals in 195 appearances, Ronaldo was benched for Tuesday's 6-1 win over Switzerland and the 21-year-old Goncalo Ramos netted a hat-trick in only his fourth game for his country. Coach Santos said after the Morocco loss that he does not regret leaving Ronaldo on the bench and repeatedly explained that his decisions were tactical, raising questions about whether Ronaldo's brilliant career is nearing a bitter end.

The 37-year-old is unlikely to retire yet but it remains to be seen where his future lies, with Spanish and English media reporting that he is closing on a move to Saudi Arabian side Al Nassr on a contract worth a staggering £173mn ($211.65mn) per year.



Spotlight

Neymar 'psychologically destroyed' by Cup exit



'It is definitely the defeat which has hurt me the most, which left me paralysed for ten minutes after the match, after which I burst into tears without being able to stop'

AFP
Doha

Neymar said yesterday he was "psychologically destroyed" by Brazil's elimination from the World Cup in a penalty shootout defeat to Croatia and admitted it hurt more than any other loss in his career.

The 30-year-old scored a superb individual effort to equal Pele's record goalscoring haul of 77 goals for the Selecao in Friday's match that finished 1-1 after extra-time.

But he never got to take a spot kick in the shootout that Croatia won 4-2 to move into the semi-finals.

Pre-tournament favourites Brazil must now wait at least another four years to win their sixth World Cup — their last dates back to 2002.

"I am psychologically destroyed. It is definitely the defeat which has hurt me the most, which left me paralysed for ten minutes after the match, after which I burst into tears without being able to stop," Neymar said in an Instagram message.

"It is going to hurt for a very long time, unfortunately," he added.

Neymar said immediately after Brazil crashed out that he might have played his last match for his country — but Pele urged him to "keep inspiring us".

The 82-year-old said on Instagram he hoped the superstar forward would carry on playing, adding that goalscoring achievements were no match for the honour of representing Brazil. "You know, as I do, that no number is greater than the joy of representing our country," Pele wrote. "I'm 82 years old, and after all this time, I hope I've inspired you in some way to get this far.... Your legacy is far from over.

"Keep inspiring us. I will continue punching the air with happiness with every goal you score, as I have done in every game I've seen you on the pitch." Pele, who was hospitalised earlier this month during treatment for colon cancer, congratulated Neymar for equalling his goalscoring record.

"I learned that the more time passes, the more our legacy grows," Pele wrote. "My record was set almost 50 years ago, and no one has been able to get close to it until now. You made it, my boy. That adds to the greatness of your achievement."

Brazil's forward Neymar (left) is consoled by defender Dani Alves after their team lost the Qatar 2022 World Cup quarter-final football match against Croatia at Education City Stadium in Al Rayyan, on Friday. *(AFP)*

Focus

South America football chief steps up claim to 2030 World Cup

AFP
Doha

South America's football chief said yesterday that FIFA should honour the legacy of Pele and Diego Maradona by awarding the centennial 2030 World Cup to the continent.

With competition intensifying before the global body decides on the event in 2024, Alejandro Dominguez said there should be less focus on "money" in the process.

Uruguay, which held the original 13-team World Cup in 1930, has linked up with Argentina, Chile and Paraguay to bid for the 2030 event, which will be the second with 48 teams.

The main challenge is a joint bid from Spain, Portugal and Ukraine, which has European governing body UEFA's backing.

Reports have said Saudi Arabia could launch a bid with Egypt and Greece.

Asked at an event honouring the ailing Pele whether the former Brazil star or the legacy of late Argentina great Maradona could help sway the decision, Dominguez said FIFA had to choose between football and money.

"The question is for FIFA — what do they plan to do with the history created by Pele and later Maradona?" said the head of CONMEBOL, the South American confederation.

"It really should be back to the roots because football is not just about money. It should not be about the competition of who puts up the most money for a World Cup."



CONMEBOL President Alejandro Dominguez.

"It should also be about recognising who made this party possible," Dominguez added, referring to Pele and Maradona, as well as Uruguay as hosts of the first World Cup.

Dominguez said CONMEBOL had also proposed that Brazil change its national shirt to honour Pele, 82, who was hospitalised this month as he battles cancer.

The badge on the shirt has five stars at the top to mark each of the country's World Cup wins.

Pele was in the winning team three times.

Dominguez said the proposal was for Brazil to "change three of their stars for three hearts, in homage to the king."

Reaction

Richarlison's family devastated, but 'proud' after Brazil defeat

AFP
Nova Venecia

Like millions of Brazilian families, Richarlison's loved ones were inconsolable after the team's exit from the World Cup, but fiercely proud to have witnessed the centre-forward shine in Qatar.

"We are so proud of him.He started from nothing, and look where he is now! He is a humble boy, a good, honest boy," said his grandmother Sebastiana Francisca de Andrade, 69, who invited about 30 people to watch the quarter-final game at her house.

The nation was on tenterhooks as Brazil, with forward Richarlison in the lineup, battled the ultimately victorious Croatia, and De Andrade couldn't bear the stress, walking away from the screen at halftime.

Richarlison built the house for his grandmother in Nova Venecia, his hometown of about 50,000 people in southeastern Espirito Santo, with his first paychecks as a professional footballer.

In the living room, there is not enough room on the sofa.

The youngest, mostly cousins of the Tottenham striker, sit on the ground wearing the colours of the 'Selecao' or the London club. He previously played for Watford and Everton in England after making his name in Brazil at Fluminense.

Faces were drawn, with occasional muffled cries of "Go Charlinho" — the affectionate nickname given to the player by his loved ones — every time he touched the ball.

After a brief moment of panic when the team's number 9 appeared to have injured his thigh at the start of the match in a clash with Croatian midfielder Luka Modric, the family was relieved to see Richarlison continue. "If he didn't score, it's because the ball wasn't passed to him," a cousin complained as the family's pride and joy was substituted in the 84th minute.

'CHILDHOOD DREAM COME TRUE'

Despite the bitter disappointment of Brazil's painful quarter-final exit, Richarlison's big sister Kettima Pereira de Andrade, 27, reflected on his rise to stardom and his place in the national team alongside superstar Neymar, after he faced several rejections before signing his first professional contract.

"When we were small, he went through a phase where he would imitate Neymar, and I would make fun of him. Now, seeing him by Neymar's side, I realise his childhood dream came true," she said.

"Our father used to take us to see all the matches he played when he was little. Everyone got into the truck, it was a party," said the young woman, who sells lingerie online. Richarlison, 25, seized the spotlight at the World Cup and became a firm favourite among Brazilians after scoring two goals against Serbia in the country's first match.

Pictures of his second goal — an agile scissor-kick — swept the globe.

In Brazil, he is also admired for his commitment to social causes, such as giving 10% of his salary to a hospital that treats cancer patients.

His grandfather died of the disease and his aunt Audiceia de Andrade, 51, is currently receiving treatment for breast cancer at the hospital.

"Our family is very united, and that's why he became this loving, supportive person who helps those in need," said Audiceia.

A professional cook, she is eagerly awaiting Richarlison's return to Nova Venecia to cook him his favourite dish: fried eggs with rice and black beans.

Morocco's Attiatallah says all players will give their best

When Morocco coach Walid Regragui announced his squad for FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, he had a clear preference for players plying their trade in Europe as they accounted for 20 of 26 spots.

The exceptions were three players from clubs in the Gulf and another three from the Moroccan club side he coached last season, Wydad.

One of the domestic trio to win Regragui's trust was 27-year-old left-back **Yahya Attiatallah,** who only received his first international call-up in March when he played in Morocco's decisive World Cup qualifying tie against DR Congo.

In Qatar, Attiatallah received a lot of praise after coming on to replace Noussair Mazraoui for the last 30 minutes of the Atlas Lions' opening group-stage match against Croatia.

He then went on to play an important role as a substitute against Belgium and Spain, playing for 22 minutes and eight minutes respectively.

However, the pinnacle of his tournament so far came in the first-ever World Cup quarter-final to be contested by an Arab side.

Mazraoui was unable to recover from the injury he picked up against Spain, thereby opening the door to Attiatallah's first start of the competition.

The player from Safi, on Morocco's Atlantic coast, made the most of his opportunity. The fans in Al Thumama Stadium exploded with joy after he swung in a perfect cross for a leaping Youssef En-Nesyri to head home and make Morocco the first African team to reach a FIFA World Cup semi-final. "Firstly, praise to God, and congratulations to all of us as Arabs, Africans and Moroccans,"



Attiatallah told FIFA+ after the historic victory.

"When I found out I was going to start, the feeling was indescribable.

"We're a family and every player's going to do their very best. We still have more to give. To play in a match like this and assist a historic goal, of course that's a historic moment for me. I still have a lot to offer."

The defender remembered to praise his coach, who previously led him to the CAF Champions League title with Wydad.

"Honestly, coach Walid Regragui has played a huge role in our good results. I want to thank him for always trusting in me and my teammates. I'm glad we've been able to repay that trust. We have more to give." (www.fifa.com)

Agreement

Saudi Arabian football federation in pact with Ghana

The Saudi Arabian Football Association (SAFF) has announced the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Ghana Football Association.

SAFF president Yasser Almisehal and GFA president Kurt Edwin Simeon-Okraku signed the agreement at a ceremony held at Saudi House in Doha.

The agreement aims to develop strong relations between the two federations to help the promotion, growth and success of football at all levels.

It provides a framework for collaboration across all areas of the game, from grassroots to elite football, including youth and women's football.

SAFF is committed to hosting both the Ghanian men's and women's national teams for matches and training camps as well as exchanges for key experts across areas related to coaching, refereeing or administrative matters.

"We're excited to establish this MoU with the Ghana Football Association and create this partnership moving forward," said Almisehal.

"The quality and talent in Ghanaian football is known across the world and we at SAFF are keen to work closely together to allow our youngsters to gain valuable playing experience while benefiting from their key insights and strengths. We look forward to working together in a meaningful manner and open up mutually beneficial opportunities."



Officials at the signing ceremony.

Commenting on the new partnership, Ghana Football Association president Kurt Edwin Simeon-Okraku commented: "Ghana has a longstanding relationship with Saudi Arabia and it is only right that we expand this level of co-operation to football – an area that unites people".

"Our brothers at the SAFF led by President Yasser Almisehal have clearly demonstrated their desire to strengthen their football to reach the highest level and we also have the same vision so it is essential for us to partner in various areas of the game to achieve our aims and objectives."

Saudi Arabia is one of the fastest growing countries in world sport with football at its heart.

Over 80% of the country's 35mn population play, follow and attend football. The Saudi Arabian Football Federation has been implementing an ambitious strategy to grow the sport across the kingdom and to become one of the top 20 best football nations. The federation is investing across player pathways, competitions, women's football, technology, workforce, hosting and governance.

Over the last three years, women's football in Saudi Arabia has experienced unprecedented investment in areas such as grassroots player development, competitions, coaching, refereeing and governance.

As a result, SAFF expressed their interest to bid for the 2026 Women's Asian Cup, established the first women's national team last year followed by the inaugural women's football league and girls' schools league.



Focus

Morocco join list of semi-final surprise packages

Morocco have achieved the unexpected by reaching the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 semi-finals after beating both Spain and Portugal in the knockout rounds. If little was expected of them prior to the tournament, the Atlas Lions have overcome every obstacle thrown in their way and have shocked the world in the process.

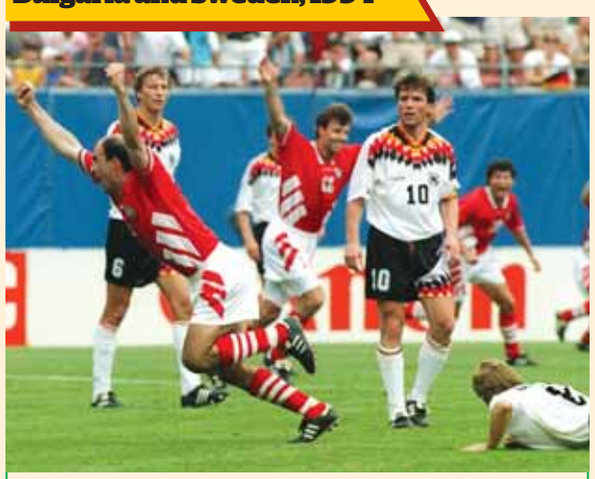
Yet they are not the first team to upset the odds and travel deep into the competition.

Remember Iordan Letchov's flying header taking Bulgaria past Germany and into the semi-finals of USA 1994? Or Croatia blazing a trail on their World Cup debut at France 1998?

We look back on some of the more surprising semi-final participants in recent memory.

> Morocco's run to the last four at Qatar 2022 is not the first time a team has exceeded expectations by reaching the semi-finals

Bulgaria and Sweden, 1994



Bulgaria celebrate scoring against Germany at USA 1994.

USA '94 is remembered as a tournament at which several nations made their World Cup debuts, as well as being a competition replete with upsets.

Neither Bulgaria nor Sweden were expected to reach the latter stages, but they both defied those expectations. Sweden advanced to the round of 16 after finishing second in their group, picking up five points along the way including a win over Russia and draws with Cameroon and Brazil.

The Scandinavians continued their World Cup fairy tale by eliminating Saudi Arabia in the round of 16, and then defeating Romania in a quarter-final penalty shootout. They were finally brought to a halt in the semis, narrowly losing to Brazil.

Bulgaria's World Cup, meanwhile, was fuelled in part by the brilliance of star Hristo Stoichkov. After winning twice in the group stage they defeated Mexico on penalties in the round of 16 and then produced an almighty upset by defeating Germany 2-1 in the quarter final.

Their journey eventually came to an end after narrowly losing to a Roberto Baggio-inspired Italy in the semi-final, before being beaten 4-0 in the third place play-off by Sweden.

Croatia, 1998

Croatia participated in their first World Cup at France 98, just two years after the national team's first taste of a major international tournament at the 1996 UEFA European Championship.

Amazingly, the Croatians reached the semi-finals. Wins over Jamaica and Japan in the group stage meant they finished second in their group. They went on to beat Romania 1-0 in the round of 16 thanks to a penalty from main man Davor Suker.

A stunning 3-0 victory over Germany in the quarter-finals qualified them for the final four, where they lost to the hosts and eventual winners France, this after taking the lead through Suker.

They ultimately finished third, beating the Netherlands 2-1 in the third place play-off match with goals from Robert Prosinecki and Suker, who ended the tournament with the Golden Boot.



Davon Suker

South Korea, 2002



Dutchman Guus Hiddink was appointed head coach of South Korea following his impressive work with the Netherlands national team between 1995-98. Upon his arrival in Asia, he immediately implemented a strict regime of long training camps which meant his side arrived in peak physical condition for the 2002 tournament that they co-hosted with Japan.

They topped their group after defeating Poland and Portugal and drawing with USA, before defying all the odds by beating Italy 2-1 in the last 16, thanks to Ahn Junghwan's golden goal.

The Koreans went on to beat Spain on penalties in the quarter-finals before losing in the semi-finals to Germany. Hiddink's side eventually finished fourth, going down 3-2 to Turkey in the third-place play-off.

Turkiye, 2002



Ilhan Mansiz (right) celebrates scoring for Turkiye against Senegal.

Turkiye were another surprise package at the 2002 tournament. After a rocky start, losing their first match to Brazil and drawing 1-1 with Costa Rica, they won their final group game against China in style with goals from Hasan Sas, Bulent Korkmaz and Umit Davala.

Another Davala goal proved the difference against hosts Japan in the round of 16, which set up a quarter-final against Senegal, who they overcame with a İlhan Mansiz golden goal to reach the semi-finals for the first time.

There Senol Gunes's men lost to Brazil courtesy of a Ronaldo strike, before bouncing back to finish third after defeating South Korea in the third place play-off.

Morocco, 2022

Morocco were drawn in a tough group comprising Croatia, Belgium and Canada but nonetheless dared to dream of reaching the round of 16 – but not a lot more. Yet the Atlas Lions duly ripped up the script. They began their campaign with a draw against Croatia, before beating Belgium and Canada. By the time they faced Spain in the last 16 they were full of confidence and ultimately came out on top following Yassine Bounou's penalty shootout heroics.

The fairy tale continued as they put Portugal to the sword in the quarter final, their defensive discipline and resilience bringing a fourth clean sheet. With Youssef En-Nesyri's winning goal, they became the first African and Arab team to reach a World Cup semi-final.



Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo (centre) looks dejected after being eliminated from the World Cup as Morocco players celebrate their progress to the semi-finals of the Qatar 2022. ***(Reuters)***

GLIMPSES OF QATAR 2022























Spotlight

Giroud in magnificent streak as France evoke spirit of 2018

France are now just two games away from becoming the first team in 60 years to retain the trophy

AFP
Al Khor

Olivier Giroud continued his magnificent World Cup by scoring France's late winner in their quarter-final against England on Saturday and admitted that the holders' battling performance in adversity evoked the spirit of their triumphant 2018 run.

France are now just two games away from becoming the first team in 60 years to retain the trophy after Giroud's fourth goal of the tournament sunk an impressive England side in a titanic battle at Al Bayt Stadium.

The holders took the lead through Aurelien Tchouameni but were pegged back early in the second half and were on the ropes for long spells before Giroud headed in the decisive goal in the 78th minute to seal a 2-1 victory.

France had considerably less possession, half as many attempts on goal and got lucky late on as Harry Kane — having earlier scored from the spot — blazed an 84th-minute penalty over the bar.

And Giroud later said the game brought back memories of his team's semi-final in Russia four years ago, when they edged out Belgium 1-0 in Saint-Petersburg before going on to beat Croatia and lift the trophy.

"This match reminds me of the Belgium game in 2018, even if the scenario is a bit different because England came back and believed in their chances and pushed forward," Giroud said.

"We showed superb spirit and worked so hard for each other. It is the same spirit as in 2018 and I hope we go as far as possible because this group is capable of great things."

Giroud was a non-scoring member of the 2018 team but at 36 he is enjoying a memorable tournament in Qatar having earlier overtaken Thierry Henry to become France's all-time top scorer.

It is a far cry from Euro 2020, when he was relegated to the bench following Karim Benzema's return to the international fold.

This time he has taken full advantage of Benzema's injury just before the World Cup began to become a key player again, and France have put their disappointing European Championship — when they lost to Switzerland on penalties in the last 16 — firmly behind them.

Their performance in Qatar also contrasts starkly with the trend at recent World Cups, with Italy, Spain and Germany going out of the last three tournaments as holders in the first round.

"The recent record of the holders has been rather negative so we can be pleased at reversing that trend," said coach Didier Deschamps, whose team will now be strongly fancied to beat Morocco in the last four. If France do go all the way to the final in Doha next Sunday and win it, they will be the first team since Brazil in 1962 to successfully defend the title.

"We are getting closer but now we have a very important next step and that is on Wednesday against Morocco. We can be satisfied with what we have done without settling for this," Deschamps added.


France's forward Olivier Giroud (left) celebrates scoring his team's second goal with defender Raphael Varane during the Qatar 2022 World Cup quarter-final against England at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor, on Saturday. *(AFP)*

World Cup 2022 top goal scorer: who could win Golden Boot?

The 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar has entered the knockout phase, and one of the top honours players will be competing for is the Golden Boot, awarded to the player with the most goals in the tournament.

The number of assists by a player is considered in the case of a tie for goals scored. If players are tied on both counts, the winner is decided by who played the fewest minutes. England captain Harry Kane bagged the prize at the 2018 World Cup in Russia, where he scored six goals and led his team to the semi-finals. Below is an overview of contenders in the race for top scorer at the 2022 World Cup:



KYLIAN MBAPPE

- The 23-year-old scored against Australia in his side's opening Group D match and bagged a second-half double against Denmark as France booked their knockout spot.
- France's talisman failed to find the net as Tunisia recorded a famous upset in their final group match.
- He added two more goals to his tally in a 3-1 win against Poland in the last 16, but was unable to score in France's 2-1 quarter-final win over England.

LIONEL MESSI

- The Argentina great is playing in what he has said is probably his last World Cup. The 35-year-old opened his account by burying a spot kick in a shock Group C loss to Saudi Arabia, before scoring and assisting Enzo Fernandez in an emotionally charged win over Mexico.
- Messi scored in Argentina's 2-1 win over Australia in the last 16, putting his side ahead after 35 minutes with a coolly taken low strike for his 94th international goal.
- He also assisted a goal and scored in Argentina's quarter-final win over the Netherlands.
- The seven-time Ballon d'Or winner has enjoyed a trophy-laden career at club level, and his fans around the world are hoping he can finally help deliver a World Cup for his country this time around.

OLIVIER GIROUD

- Giroud, 36, surpassed Thierry Henry to become France's all-time top scorer when he netted his 52nd goal in 117 appearances for Les Bleus in their 3-1 World Cup last-16 win over Poland.
- He had drawn level with Henry on 51 after netting a double in France's 4-1 win over Australia in their opening Group D game.
- Giroud also scored in France's 2-1 quarter-final win over England.



GOLDEN BOOT STANDINGS*

Player	T	GL	A	G	M
K Mbappe	France	5	2	5	387
L Messi	Argentina	4	2	5	481
O Giroud	France	4	0	4	317
A Kramaric	Croatia	2	0	5	348
Y En-Nesyri	Morocco	2	0	5	391
J Alvarez	Argentina	2	0	5	290

T- Team GL- Goals A-Assists G-Games M-Minutes

*Stats as of December 10 *(Reuters)*

Top assisters at Qatar 2022

Bruno Fernandes (3) *
Antoine Griezmann (3)
Harry Kane (3) *
Jordi Alba (2) *
Diogo Dalot (2) *
Ousmane Dembele (2)
Denzel Dumfries (2) *
Joao Felix (2) *
Phil Foden (2) *
Raphael Guerreiro (2) *
Theo Hernandez (2)
Davy Klaassen (2) *
Kylian Mbappe (2)
Lionel Messi (2)
Mislav Orsic (2)
Ivan Perisic (2)
Christian Pulisic (2) *
Dusan Tadic (2) *
Vinicius Junior (2) *
Andrija Zivkovic (2) *

* Denotes a player whose team have been eliminated.

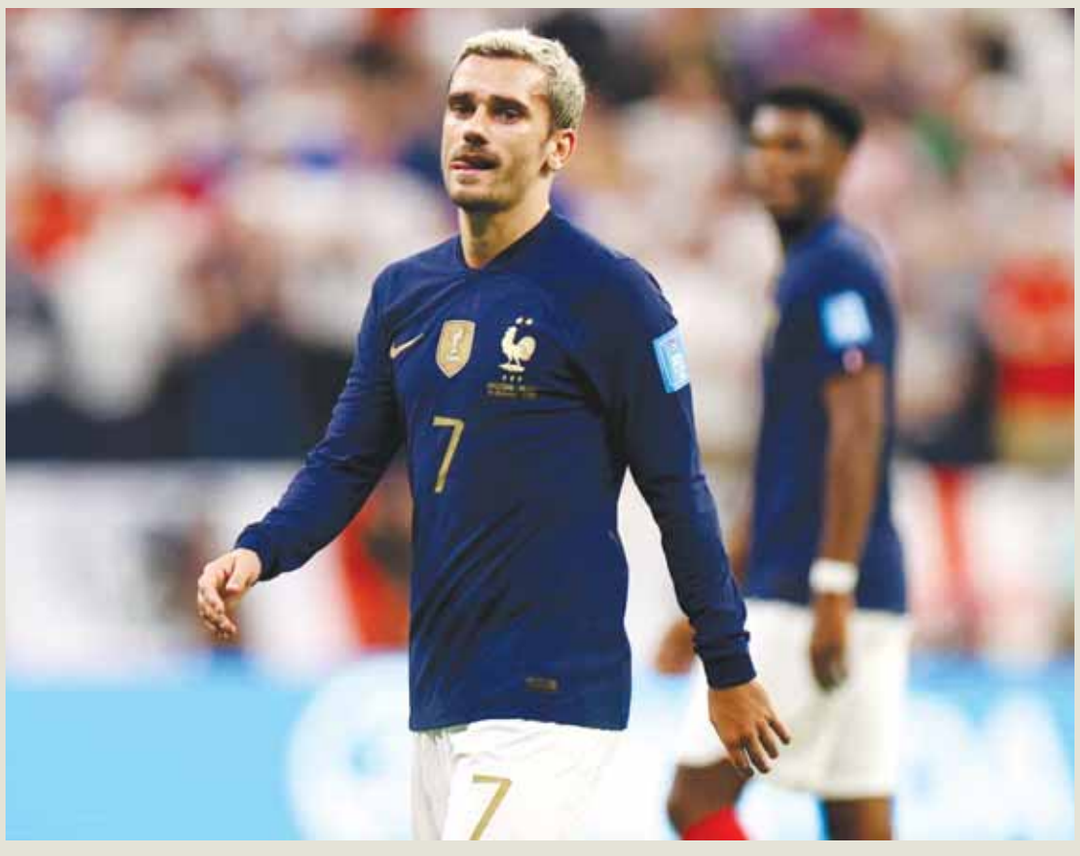
Three-plus assists in one World Cup (1966-2018)

- **1966:** Siegfried Held, Uwe Seeler (4), Antonio Simoes, Jose Torres (3)
- **1970**: Pele (5), Tostao (4), Hristo Bonev, Reinhard Libuda, Gerd Muller, Rivellino (3)
- **1974**: Robert Gadocha (5), Johan Cruyff, Dragan Dzajic, Uli Hoeness (3)
- **1978**: Rob Rensenbrink, Rene van de Kerkhof (3)
- **1982**: Pierre Littbarski (5), Zico (4)
- **1986**: Diego Maradona (5), Igor Belanov (4), Dominique Rocheteau (4), Stephane Demol (3)
- **1990**: Andreas Brehme, Jozef Chovanec, Lubo Moravcik (3)
- **1994**: Thomas Hassler (5), Tomas Brolin (4), Gheorghe Hagi (4), Sergi (3)
- **1998**: Dennis Bergkamp, Youri Djorkaeff, Tahar El-Khalej, Brian Laudrup, Ronaldo, Juan Sebastian Veron (3)
- **2002**: Michael Ballack (4), David Beckham, Francisco De Pedro, Hasan Sas, Ronaldinho, Bernd Schneider, Christian Ziege (3)
- **2006**: Francesco Totti (4), Luis Figo, Andrea Pirlo, Juan Roman Riquelme, Bastian Schweinsteiger (3)
- **2010**: Kaka, Dirk Kuyt, Thomas Muller, Mesut Ozil, Bastian Schweinsteiger (3)
- **2014**: Juan Cuadrado, Toni Kroos (4), Karim Benzema, Andre Schurrle (3)
- **2018**: No player got more than two assists.

Did you know?

- Hristo Bonev, despite carrying an injury throughout Mexico 1970, managed an assist every 68 minutes of action on average. The Bulgarian and Moroccan Tahar El-Khalej are the only players listed above who didn't appear in the knockout phase of the tournament.
- Reinhard Libuda was nicknamed 'Stan', after the hugely inventive English winger Stanley Matthews.
- Andreas Brehme, Sergi and Christian Ziege – all left-backs – are the only defenders to have registered more than two assists in a World Cup. The West German incredibly recorded six combined goals and assists at Italia '90 – a figure bettered only by Toto Schillaci (7).
- Carles Puyol, of all people, produced a 360 turn en route to setting up Fernando Torres's goal against Ukraine at Germany 2006.
- Lionel Messi set up a goal just 13 minutes into his World Cup debut in 2006. 'The Atomic Flea' is now the only player to register an assist in five World Cups. The next-most is three, managed by Grzegorz Lato, Diego Maradona and David Beckham.
- Thomas Muller won the adidas Golden Boot at South Africa on the assists' tiebreaker. Four players finished tied at the top on five goals, but Muller laid on more goals (3) than Diego Forlan, Wesley Sneijder and David Villa (1 apiece).
- The Brazilians nicknamed Toni Kroos 'Garçom' (Waiter) due to his creativity in the early stages of the 2014 tournament. The Germany midfielder went on to set up one and score two in a historic 7-1 win over Brazil in the semi-finals.

(www.fifa.com)





Review

Southgate 'proud' of England performance at Qatar 2022

'I AM VERY PROUD OF HOW THEY HAVE BEEN, NOT ONLY IN THIS GAME BUT THROUGH THE WHOLE TOURNAMENT'

By Rizwan Rehmat
Al Khor


England manager Gareth Southgate looks on during the World Cup quarter-final against France at Al Bayt Stadium on Saturday. *(AFP)*


England's coach Gareth Southgate (left) and England's defender Kieran Trippier leave the team hotel yesterday in Doha. *(Reuters)*

Long-serving manager Gareth Southgate yesterday said he was 'proud' of his team's performances at FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 where England lost in the quarter-final against defending champions France.

With 68,895 fans in attendance at Al Bayt Stadium, France won 2-1 after goals by Aurelien Tchouameni (17) and Olivier Giroud (78).

England captain Harry Kane reduced the deficit with a classy spot kick in the 54th minute but the Tottenham Hotspur star shockingly missed a penalty late in the second half as the Three Lions were sent packing.

"They know how close they have come. They know that they have pushed a top nation all the way," Southgate after the match. "(There was) more possession, more attempts on goal (from England). I am very proud of how they have been, not only in this game but through the whole tournament," he added.

"Some young players have announced themselves on the world stage. I think we have shown a different side of ourselves, in terms of the way that we have played. We have shown character to come back from going behind.

"We have withstood pressure, expectation, everything, really. I could not ask more of the group of players or the group of staff. They could not have given any more," Southgate, 52, said.

"It's such a united group and they showed that (against France). They showed the character. They showed how to play against a big team, to be brave in the way that we tried to defend as well.

"There were mistakes at both ends that decide the outcome of the game, but I think that we've, once again, shown the rest of the world that English football is healthy, and we've got some very good players, not only for now, but for the future as well," he said. Southgate refused to lay the blame on Kane who missed the second penalty that clearly cost England the chance to draw level and potentially force the match into extra time.

"As you would expect, he (Kane) is very low but he has got nothing to reproach himself for," Southgate said. "We are in the position we are as a team, because of his leadership, because of his goals over a long period of time.

"Tonight, the result is the result because of a hundred minutes of football and lots of things that happened at both ends of the pitch. Even if that penalty went in, we would still have got a lot to do to win the game. For us, no recriminations. We have always stuck together as a team. The group of players has been brilliant. We win and lose together, simple as that," he added.

> **"I think the team have progressed. (They) have really improved through the tournament. We wanted to go toe to toe (against France). We felt that was the way we wanted to approach this tournament, and we've done that. I don't think we looked out of places.**
>
> **– Gareth Southgate,**
> *after losing Qatar 2022 quarter-final against France*

Southgate said England finishing fourth at Russia World Cup 2018 and ending runners-up at 2020 Euro Championships prior to clinching a quarters berth in Qatar underlined England's progress in the last four years.

"I think the team have progressed. (They) have really improved through the tournament," Southgate, who took over as manager in 2016, said. "We wanted to go toe to toe (against France). We felt that was the way we wanted to approach this tournament, and we've done that. I don't think we looked out of place.

"There are so many good things that they've done and there's so much to be excited about when you see the age of a lot of the players as well. So, hard to compare, because you still have to win the games that are winnable, to reach semi-finals and finals that we have done in the past, and that's proved not to be easy for other teams in the tournament.

"I think we've had consistent performances across three tournaments. Tonight is probably the best, I think, we've played against a major nation across the period I've been in charge, but we have fallen short.

"In the end, the scoreline is all that matters, so that's very hard to take," he said.

When asked if he felt 'hurt' tumbling in the quarter-finals stage compared to appearing at the semi-finals at 2018 in Russia, Southgate said: "I don't know (if it hurt more). In a way, I feel like we've done such a good job that you have fewer regrets. My immediate feeling is there are fewer things to reflect on and possibly have done differently in terms of the flow of the game, and the way that we responded after half-time."

He added: "When we conceded the second goal, it was one of our strongest periods in the game, really. However you go out of a tournament, it's always really, really difficult. But I can only say that the pride I have in the players and the way they've gone about the whole thing, the whole group have been exceptional, as have all the staff."

Southgate said he was not one to hold a grudge against a referee's poor decisions in the match.

"I don't think I should be speaking about referees. Just to compliment France, wish them good luck. They are a fantastic team, they have got some brilliant players. Didier (Deschamps) has done a fantastic job. So, we wish them well. Congratulations to them. I don't think it's right, especially when you lose, to speak about the officials," Southgate said.

Southgate said he won't be rushed into making a decision about his future.

"I think, whenever I've finished these tournaments, I've needed time to make correct decisions, because emotionally, you go through so many different feelings and the energy that it takes through these tournaments is enormous," Southgate said.

"I want to make the right decision, whatever that is, for the team, for England, for the FA, and I've got to be sure that whatever decision I make is the right one.

"I think it's right to take a bit of time to do that, because I know, in the past, how my feelings have fluctuated in the immediate aftermath of tournaments," he added.

Focus

Captain Kane 'gutted' after World Cup penalty pain

AFP
Al Khor


England's Harry Kane reacts after missing from the penalty spot as France's Hugo Lloris celebrates with teammates at Al Bayt Stadium on Saturday. *(Reuters)*

Harry Kane was left "gutted" on Saturday after missing a crucial penalty in England's 2-1 World Cup quarter-final defeat to France.

England skipper Kane blazed an 84th minute spot-kick over the bar that would have levelled the score at 2-2 at the Al Bayt Stadium. It was another cruel chapter in England's decades-long psychodrama revolving around major tournaments and penalty heartaches.

Kane had earlier made no mistake with another penalty on 54 minutes that saw him equal Wayne Rooney's England goalscoring tally of 53 goals.

"As the captain, I'll take that on the chin and that responsibility, missing the penalty, so it's hard," Kane said afterwards.

"Really tough night to take. I'm gutted, the team are gutted. We had the belief that we could achieve something special at this World Cup, but it came down to small details.

"On the night we had the better chances, the better spells in the game, but it comes down to the execution."

Kane, 29, is one of the most reliable penalty-takers in world football, converting 58 spotkicks throughout his career with only 11 misses.

The England captain said he had felt confident as he lined up his second penalty of the night against France goalkeeper and Tottenham team-mate Hugo Lloris.

"I'm someone who, whenever I prepare, prepare for one penalty in the game, two penalties, so I can't fault my preparation or detail," Kane said. "In the lead-up I felt as confident as I did on the first as I did on the second. It purely comes down to execution. I'll take that on the chin.

"Of course it hurts now and it'll hurt for probably a long time, but that's part of being captain and a leader in the team, you have to take responsibility."

Kane had looked inconsolable at the final whistle, hunched on the turf as team-mates rallied to his support. England manager Gareth Southgate sprang to Kane's defence. "There's nobody I would have rather had in that situation and if we had one tomorrow I'd feel exactly the same way," Southgate said. "For me he's been a fantastic leader of this group. He's the best but the best are still 85 percent (success rate) so even the best are going to miss at times so that's football.

"It's cruel for him because he will feel disappointed in himself but he shouldn't because it's 100 minutes of football and there's a lot of things that can happen in terms of winning a game."

ENGLAND'S FUTURE IS BRIGHT DESPITE PAINFUL WORLD CUP EXIT

Doha: England came up short against a football superpower in a major tournament once again but unlike previous eliminations, Gareth Southgate and his squad can take plenty of encouragement after going toe to toe with reigning champions France.

England have not had a whiff of World Cup silverware in over half a century and though Southgate's team have come close to realising that dream, the trophy will not be coming home for at least another four years. A young England side revitalised by Southgate had defied the odds in Russia with a semi-final run that ended in extra-time heartbreak against eventual runners-up Croatia. Despite arriving in Qatar with more belief than they did four years ago, however, the semi-finals proved to be a step too far. For a squad now rich in tournament experience, the World Cup in Qatar was supposed to be another deep run after reaching last year's European Championship final which they lost on penalties. "We're not here just to reach a quarter-final," Kane said before the France game. Yet that is where they fell to a formidable and experienced French side in a game of fine margins. England created plenty of chances that rattled an edgy French defence, but it was Didier Deschamps's clinical team who prevailed in a gripping contest with little to separate the sides apart from the 2-1 scoreline. "We've done such a good job that you have fewer regrets. My immediate feeling is that there are less things to reflect on that could have been done differently," Southgate said.

For England, the future is bright with a new generation of players like Bukayo Saka, Phil Foden and Jude Bellingham - youngsters who are yet to reach their prime - lighting up the tournament.

"I don't think we looked out of place. There are so many good things they've done, so much to be excited about - like the age of the players," Southgate said.

"We've once again shown the rest of the world that English football is healthy and we've got some players not only for now but for the future as well."


England's Bukayo Saka reacts during Qatar 2022 quarter-final against France on Saturday.

SOUTHGATE PRESSURE

A six-match winless run and five games without a goal from open play in the Nations League this year had pointed to an early exit in Qatar.

There were calls for Southgate to step down before the World Cup, but the manager and the English FA kept calm.

"I suppose for all international managers, World Cups and European Championships are what you were always judged on in the past," Southgate had said.

Any questions about their readiness for the World Cup were erased as they started with a 6-2 thrashing of Iran before topping the group with a tournament-high nine goals.

Senegal were ruthlessly dispatched in the last 16 with goals from all areas of the pitch and Kane opened his account to justify his claim that he had learned to taper his form to peak in the knockout stages.

But despite equalling Wayne Rooney's record as England's top scorer with his 53rd goal when he equalised against France, Kane wasted the opportunity to claim the record outright when he skied his second penalty over the bar.

"It is a result of 100 minutes of football and a lots of things that happened at both ends of the pitch. Even if that penalty was scored, we had a lot to do to win the game," Southgate said.

"We've always stuck together as a team... We win or lose together, simple as that."

SPORT

FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022

Spotlight

Deschamps inspires France to the brink of another final

'I will be here for the semi-final and then we'll see. One thing at a time'



France's coach Didier Deschamps (centre) celebrates with forwards Kylian Mbappe (left) and Antoine Griezmann after their win over England in the Qatar 2022 World Cup quarter-finals at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor on Saturday. *(AFP)*

AFP
Al Khor

France's World Cup run is turning into a triumph for coach Didier Deschamps, who has won over those who felt he had stayed in charge too long and is within touching distance of another final. Victory over England on Saturday means France now face Morocco in the last four on Wednesday, and whatever happens there, Deschamps will be free to decide if he wants to extend his 10-year spell in charge.

"The ball is in my court and I will decide. I will be here for the semi-final and then we'll see. One thing at a time," said Deschamps after fulfilling the objective set out for him by French Football Federation president Noel Le Graet. "The president is happy. Lots of people are happy. But I want to savour being back in the last four. I am thinking about Wednesday, not about other things."

Deschamps was appointed in 2012 and some felt he should have bowed out on a high after France's 2018 World Cup triumph. What followed was a disappointing performance at Euro 2020, when they lost in the last 16 despite a return for Karim Benzema from the international wilderness.

With Zinedine Zidane available and seemingly ready to become France's next coach, the World Cup in Qatar has arguably been Deschamps' greatest challenge yet. The holders appeared diminished by injuries coming into the tournament, deprived of starting midfielders Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kante and then of Benzema before a ball had been kicked.

Many wondered if France would go the way of the past three reigning champions, Italy, Spain and Germany, who were all knocked out of the next World Cup in the group phase.

"We'll admit that we had doubted Didier Deschamps a little bit. We wondered if he hadn't stayed too long, if he still had his mojo," said the daily *Le Parisien* in an editorial. "He came to Qatar surrounded by some doubts. Those have been swept away. It is as if nothing could stop this France team. A France that wins. Deschamps' France."

Olivier Giroud has stepped up spectacularly in the absence of Benzema, with the veteran striker scoring four times in Qatar, including the winner against England. Deschamps decided just before the tournament to ditch his experiment with a three-man defence and revert to a 4-3-3 formation.

Most significantly, he has solved his midfield conundrum by turning forward Antoine Griezmann into arguably the best playmaker at the tournament. Short of form coming into the World Cup and without an international goal in more than a year, the Atletico Madrid player was brilliant once more against England, setting up both goals.

"He is aware of the quality of his players and top players, at a World Cup, kind of need little bits of advice rather than having to do lots of hard work," David Trezeguet, who won the 1998 World Cup alongside Deschamps, said. "Deschamps has understood his players and he has managed to get all his players to give their maximum."

There is an aura about the 54-year old, who is associated with the French national team's greatest moments over the past quarter of a century. He captained Les Bleus to their first World Cup in 1998 and to victory at Euro 2000 before coaching them to their triumph in Russia four years ago.

France's recent major tournament record is formidable – they have won two of the past six World Cups and reached another final in that time. Deschamps also took them to the Euro 2016 final and France are now just one game away from another World Cup final.

"He is very serene. He has prepared this competition very, very well," said his assistant Guy Stephan. "He knew exactly what he wanted to do. He has the experience of major tournaments and that experience benefits the team."

If France beat Morocco and then win the final they will be the first team in 60 years to successfully defend the World Cup, and Deschamps will be the first coach to win the trophy twice since Italy's Vittorio Pozzo in the 1930s.

FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022

FRANCE vs ENGLAND QUARTERS IN NUMBERS

1	France became the first defending champions to reach the semi-finals in 24 years, since Brazil in 1998.
7	England exited the World Cup at the quarter-final stage for the seventh time – more than any other nation.
27	Antoine Griezmann record his 27th assists for France, this is more than any player for the national team over the last 50 years. Thierry Henry and Zinedine Zidane had 26 each.
4	Griezmann's assist was his fourth at the World Cup, the most by a French male since the 1966 World Cup (our dataset).
4	Olivier Giroud go-ahead goal was his fourth in Qatar. He is now tied for the 3rd-most in a single men's World Cup by a French player.
53	Harry Kane tied Wayne Rooney as the joint-highest scorer for the England men's side.
4	Kane's strike was also his fourth career penalty kick goal in World Cups, tying Rob Rensenbrink, Gabriel Batistuta and Eusebio for most all-time by any player.
11	Another record for Kane as he captained England for the 11th time at the World Cup finals, a new record for the men's side.

Focus

Griezmann's deeper role pays dividends for holders France

By Sports Reporter
Doha

With Antoine Griezmann in such stellar form, France are entitled to think big. The Atletico Madrid man turned in another sparkling performance against England in the quarter-finals of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, teeing up Aurelien Tchouameni for the opening goal of the night before swinging in a pinpoint cross for Olivier Giroud to nod in the winner.

Serving up assists comes naturally to Griezmann, who provided four of them at Russia 2018, including two in the final. According to a number of media outlets, the brace against England made the former Barcelona player France's all-time most prolific provider of assists with 28, two more than Thierry Henry and Zinedine Zidane.

Yet, in contrast to four years ago when he scored four goals, Griezmann has yet to find the back of the net at Qatar 2022. There is a very good reason for this: in the absence of Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kante and having chosen to revert to a four-man defence, coach Didier Deschamps has come up with an entirely new role for the 31-year-old, slotting him into a three-man midfield alongside Tchouameni and Adrien Rabiot.

Adopting a less attacking position than in the past, in more of a hybrid role in which he also has to defend more, Griezmann has become France's link-up man, a job he has excelled in at this World Cup.

"I'm pretty free in how I link up with defence and attack," said the player in a press conference a few days ago. "When we're defending, I have to help out my teammates. And when we have the ball, I have to try to play it as well as I can. It gives me more choice. Physically, I feel great, and when I'm feeling good my head's a lot better too and it's easier to keep doing it over and over again."

In the eyes of many, Deschamps' decision to take a player who impressed just behind the main striker at Russia 2018 and deploy him in a more withdrawn position has proved a masterstroke. In a recent interview with French sports newspaper *L'Equipe*, former Uruguay international Diego Forlan was full of praise for Griezmann. "He links the midfielders and the forwards up perfectly," he said. "He has a very important job to do in the team. He's France's key player if you ask me."

Those views are echoed by Argentinian midfielder Javier Pastore, who plays for Elche in La Liga and has come up against Griezmann on the pitch.

"He gets everywhere," Pastore told French football magazine *So Foot*. "He's such an important player for Les Bleus. Griezmann has a more attacking brief for his club and plays in an area where he's expected to score and make decisive passes, whereas for his country, he does the lot, even if it's not exactly beautiful to watch."

If France come home with the World Cup trophy in their hands and Griezmann has still not got his name on the scoresheet, French fans will not care in the slightest. They will, however, have every reason to thank him for his amazing adaptability.



France's forward Olivier Giroud celebrates with Antoine Griezmann (top) after scoring against England at the Al Bayt Stadium. *(AFP)*

Bottomline

Brazil captain Silva admits agony of shock World Cup exit



AFP
Al Rayyan

Brazil captain **Thiago Silva** said his team's World Cup exit to Croatia on penalties was painful and that he was coming to terms with the fact he would never win the trophy. The five-time champions lost Friday's quarter-final 4-2 in a penalty shootout after a 1-1 draw at the end of extra time in Qatar.

Neymar had given them the lead in extra time but Bruno Petkovic levelled in the dying minutes of the match. "It is difficult," said Silva. "I have been through some disappointments in my life and when we lose something important that we have as an objective it hurts quite a lot. But we have to try to lift our heads and carry on. There is no other alternative."

The Brazil captain said his side had switched off for Croatia's goal. "I think all of a sudden we lost our concentration," Silva said. "We are not used to being hit on the break like that. We became a little disorganised and that is where the goal came from."

The Chelsea centre-back, 38, has likely played his final World Cup match. "Sadly as a player I am not going to get to lift this trophy," he said. "Who knows if in future I will get the chance in another role."

Meanwhile, midfielder Casemiro Casemiro says it is "hard to find words" after Brazil's unexpected World Cup quarter-final exit to Croatia but refused to declare his future at international level. The midfielder started four matches for his country in Qatar, netting the late winner in their 1-0 group stage win over Switzerland. Casemiro, who had hammered home his spot kick in the shoot-out against Croatia, attempted to unpack his emotions after a gruelling night. "All defeats are painful, especially when you have a goal, a dream, you have a four-year job for that moment," he said.

"But it's hard to find words. Hard to find moments. It's lifting your head, life goes on. We are sad, everyone in the group did their best. We get upset, mainly because of the way it was. It was in our hand, it escaped there. Hard moment. Now it's peace of mind, life has to go on."

Casemiro refrained from ruling himself out of the international football scene, explaining he felt in good shape as things stand. He added: "I'm 30, man. Of course, there are always kids, but I'm 30 years old, I'm living the best moment of my career, I'm very happy at the club I'm at. I missed an opportunity, but we need to see."

Casemiro will now fly back to Manchester as fellow Brazilians Antony and Fred refocus their attentions on the resumption of the domestic season at United.

Meanwhile, goalkeeper Alisson said Brazil should have no regrets despite their failure to progress beyond the World Cup quarter-finals. Alisson was unable to keep out any of Croatia's penalties but he believes Brazil – who will also be under the tutelage of a new coach after Tite reiterated his plan to leave his post – should not reflect too harshly on their performance in Qatar.

"I think what went wrong is that it's football – anything can happen," Alisson said. "People talked about us as favourites because of what we did on the pitch, because of our performances, because of the quality of our players. "I said before, we don't have anything to regret, we would not change anything because we fought, prepared ourselves and were ready to try and win the World Cup. This is football, things don't always happen the way we want. No regrets, we look forward to the challenge that's in front of us."

Alisson conceded "the frustration is huge" but added: "We are proud of the dedication of each player, of the things we did on the pitch. The performances were really good. In my opinion we didn't deserve to lose this game, in the World Cup though there can be penalties and unfortunately we were defeated on that."

Alisson, though, suggested the setback will only make Brazil's squad grow. "We're going to have players who have to step up now, show leadership," he added. "We have so many players who can lead a team, so many who do that already, even the young players.

"We have young talents who will improve even more, learn from this World Cup and we have more experienced players as well who can still contribute. Now it's difficult to think about the future, because we have so much pain at the moment, but hopefully the future will be bright for us. We have just to take this defeat, learn from that and keep on going."