QNB | FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022
الداعم الرسمي لكأس العالم FIFA 2022™ في الشرق الأوسط وإفريقيا
Official Middle East and Africa Supporter of the FIFA World Cup 2022™
Dream Bigger
qnb.com

Saturday, December 17, 2022
Jumada I 23, 1444 AH
GULF TIMES
SPORT

FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022



Spotlight

FIFA to 'revisit' plan to scrap four-team groups

Infantino announces plans for a 32-team Club World Cup from 2025, despite opposition from Europe's biggest clubs

AFP
Doha

FIFA looks set to revise plans to introduce three-team groups for the 2026 World Cup, world football chief Gianni Infantino said yesterday. FIFA had previously indicated that the 2026 finals, which will expand to 48 teams from 32, would see countries divided into 16 groups of three during the first round.

Under that format, the top two teams in each group would advance to a 32-team knockout tournament. However, FIFA president Infantino said the thrilling success of the existing first-round format at the Qatar World Cup – where teams were divided into traditional groups of four – had prompted a rethink.

Several groups in Qatar went down to the wire, with qualification hanging in the balance until the final whistle. "The groups of four have been absolutely incredible until the last minute of the last match," Infantino told a press conference in Doha. "We have to revisit or at least rediscuss the format, whether it's 16 groups of three or 12 groups of four. This is something that will be on the agenda in the next few weeks."

Infantino added that the World Cup format for 2026 could be modelled along the lines of the European Championship, which has six groups of four, with the four best third-placed teams also advancing to the knockout rounds. The 2026 World Cup is being co-hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Infantino said the enlarged competition would lead to a financial bonanza for FIFA. Revenues in the four-year cycle leading up to 2026 are projected to increase to $11bn – up from $7.5bn in the cycle ending in 2022. Asked to explain the huge projected increase in revenues, Infantino cited the expanded number of teams, existing stadium infrastructure and the size of the North American market.

"We are bullish about the power of football," Infantino said. "We are convinced the impact of the game will be massive. It has been massive here and it will be incredible in North America. Three huge countries, 48 teams. More games, revenues will go up in terms of broadcasting, in terms of sponsorship, hospitality. We will play in huge stadiums used for American football, 80-90,000 capacity. We are expecting 5.5 million fans travelling for these events."



FIFA president Gianni Infantino arrives for the the press conference at the Qatar National Convention Center in Doha yesterday. *(Reuters)*

Meanwhile, FIFA chief announced plans for a 32-team Club World Cup from 2025, despite reported opposition from Europe's biggest clubs. An expansion of the competition has long been a pet project of Infantino's. A 24-team event, featuring eight sides from Europe, was planned for 2021 in China but was put on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Infantino said the new-look tournament would be even bigger than first planned. "We had agreed a few years ago to have a new 24-team men's Club World Cup," the FIFA president. "It should have taken place in 2021 but was postponed because of Covid. The new competition will take place in 2025 and will feature 32 teams, making it really like a World Cup."

Reports in the British media this week said European clubs had rejected FIFA's proposal to launch the new-look competition. The plans are for an expanded tournament to be held every four years instead of annually, as is the case for the current seven-team event.

"The first edition will take place in 2025 in the summer and during that slot where in past years it was the Confederations Cup," Infantino said. "It will be slightly longer because there will be 32 teams but they will be the best teams in the world who will be invited to participate."

Infantino said next year's Club World Cup, in its current format, would take place in Morocco from February 1 to 11, 2023.

Morocco hosted the tournament in 2013 and again in 2014, while the most recent edition was held in the United Arab Emirates in February, with Chelsea lifting the trophy.

The 2023 tournament is set to continue in its existing format – up until now it has featured the six continental champions plus the top side from the host nation. Real Madrid will represent Europe after winning last season's UEFA Champions League. Flamengo of Brazil, Al Hilal of Saudi Arabia, Wydad Casablanca of Morocco, Seattle Sounders from the United States and New Zealand's Auckland City are the other current continental champions.

Happy National Day, towards greater achievements



QNB | FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022
الداعم الرسمي لكأس العالم FIFA 2022™ في الشرق الأوسط وإفريقيا
Official Middle East and Africa Supporter of the FIFA World Cup 2022™
qnb.com

SPORT

Spotlight

Magical Messi saves his best for last at Qatar World Cup

Argentina captain's statistics speak for themselves: six starts, five goals, three assists en route to final against France

Reuters
Doha

As if he had not made enough fairy-tales, Argentina's little genius Lionel Messi has saved the potentially most magical script for his last World Cup — with one line left to write. With immense pressure on him to match the late great Diego Maradona and send the trophy back to Buenos Aires, Messi has lit up the Qatar tournament while others in the superstar stratum — Neymar, Cristiano Ronaldo — have underwhelmed and gone home.

From Argentina's opening game until their semi-final win over Croatia, Messi, near the end of his career and at his fifth World Cup aged 35, has been the tournament's out-and-out star. His match statistics speak for themselves: six starts, five goals, three assists en route to Sunday's final against France.

Smashing so many records it is hard to keep track, Messi has beaten Maradona's tally of World Cup goals and appearances for Argentina, and on Sunday will jump ahead of Lothar Matthaeus' joint record 25-match appearances at the tournament.

Beyond the dazzling data, however, it has been Messi's mesmerizing motion, and joyous celebrations, that have electrified football fans around the world.

Spending large passages of play at walking pace and barely bothering to defend at times, Messi has waited for his moments, employing with deadly effect his low centre-of-gravity, stunning change of pace and shimmying runs with ball glued to feet.

He is "a sprite floating on the periphery of the game until the moment is right," wrote British sports writer Jonathan Wilson. "You can mark a man; much harder to mark a ghost."

After a shock opening upset by Saudi Arabia, it was Messi who rallied the team: five wins followed. His best goal was a sumptuous low strike from outside the box against Mexico. And pundits are still shaking their heads over his pinpoint pass to Nahuel Molina for Argentina's first goal against the Netherlands in the quarter-final.

What made it remarkable, and a candidate for one of the all-time great assists, is that Messi did not look up yet found Molina with preposterous perfection. It was in that game where Messi cemented his Qatari love affair with Argentine fans, who in the past have sometimes compared him harshly against Maradona's extrovert personality, passion for his country, and 1986 World Cup triumph.

After scoring a penalty to send Argentine fans into delirium, the usually impeccably-behaved Messi ran towards the Dutch bench cupping his ears in a provocative gesture. Then after the game, he confronted a Dutch striker with a jibe caught on camera: "What are you looking at, fool?"

Though some pundits criticized him for disrespect, Argentine fans were largely delighted at the Maradona-like flashes of defiance from the introverted Messi.

Some have had tattoos of the phrase. "The game against Holland was when his 'inner Maradona' finally came out. They are one. They are eternal. They are Argentina!" said one ecstatic fan Jorge Castellanos, who was at the game with a flag depicting both men arm-in-arm.

Despite such adulation, everyone knows that true immortal parity with Maradona — at least in the biggest sporting tournament on earth — does still hinge on beating the French. Many non-Argentines have long had Argentina as their second team, hoping Messi will win the World Cup if their own nation cannot to complete what would be a beautiful story.

Messi left Argentina at 13 to join Barcelona's youth setup. Despite worries that he was too small, the new boy shone in the junior ranks before coach Frank Rijkaard gave him a senior debut at the age of 16 in a friendly against Porto in 2003.

Messi went on to become Barcelona's all-time top scorer and appearance maker with 672 goals in 778 games. In one season, 2011-12, he smashed La Liga's scoring record with 50 goals. In total, he won 35 trophies with Barcelona, including 10 La Liga titles and four Champions League trophies, before moving to Paris St Germain last year.

Along the way, he won the Ballon d'Or a record seven times and FIFA Player of the Year six. For Argentina, he is the all-time top scorer and led his nation to Copa America glory last year after a 28-year trophy drought including a string of heartbreaking finals defeats.

All that is missing in the Messi story is a World Cup. But even should the unthinkable happen and Argentina lose, it seems he has won over a nation that now knows Messi loved the shirt every bit as much as Maradona, brought them wondrous moments over the years, and simply could not have tried harder or come closer to lifting the World Cup.

Argentine journalist Sofia Martinez Mateos summed up the mood when she ended an interview with Messi after the semi-final this week not with a question but with a speech on behalf of the nation.

"The final is coming and of course we all want to win, but I want to tell you that whatever the result, there is something no-one can ever take from you," she told a visibly moved Messi.

"You have entered the heart of every Argentine. Honestly, there's not a kid without your shirt. You have marked all our lives... Carry it in your heart because that is more important than a World Cup and you've already won that, thanks Captain."

MESSI'S CAREER BY THE NUMBERS

499 million: Global followers on social media platforms Facebook and Instagram (over 10 times the population of Argentina)

$120 million: Messi's estimated earnings for the 2022-23 season before taxes and agents' fees, according to Forbes.

$26.60 million: Messi's estimated transfer value, according to Swiss research group CIES Football Observatory.

2,194: Minutes played in the World Cup. Only Paolo Maldini of Italy has played more (2,217)

853: Club matches for Barcelona B, Barcelona, and Paris St Germain

701: Club goals for Barcelona B, Barcelona, and Paris St Germain

171: International caps

96: International goals

37: Club trophies won

35: Age

25: Matches played at the World Cup (joint record with Lothar Matthaeus)

18: Appearances as captain in the World Cup — a record

16: World Cup match victories (Miroslav Klose has 17)

16 years: The gap between his first and latest World Cup goals

10: Player of the match awards (first given in 2002)

11: World Cup goals (Argentine record)

7: Ballons d'Or

6: Men to have played in five World Cups Messi, Matthaeus, Antonio Carbajal, Rafa Marquez, Andres Guardado and Cristiano Ronaldo)

6: Assists in the knockout phase of World Cups

5: World Cups played in and assisted in

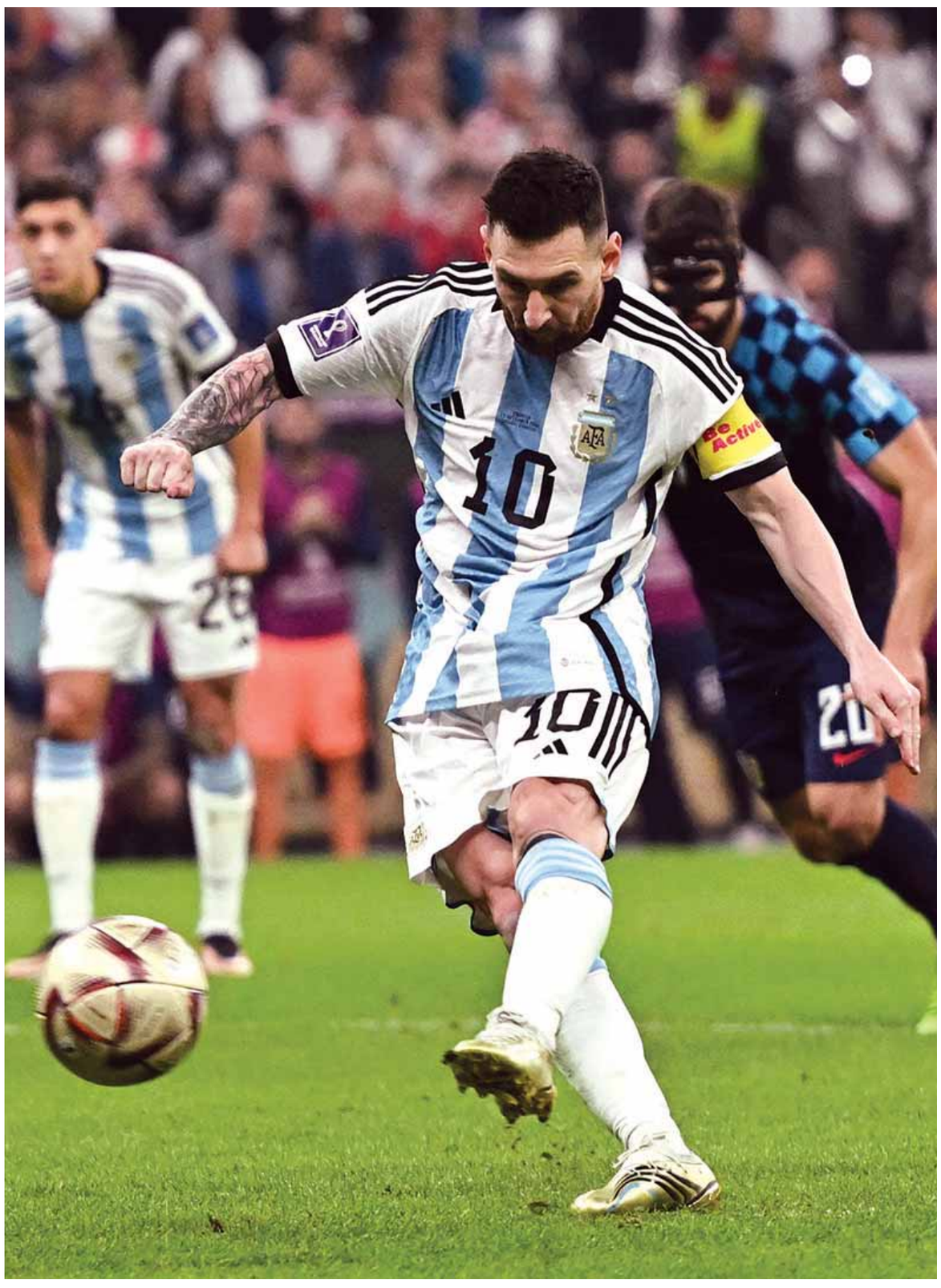
2: World Cup finals

1: Copa America trophy

0: World Cup winners' medals



An Argentina fan with Lionel Messi's name and number on the back of his shirt is seen at Souq Waqif market in Doha. *(Reuters)*



Focus

Brazil's 'shameless' fans supporting Messi's Argentina in final

AFP
Sao Paulo

Jose Arnaldo dos Santos Junior travelled to Qatar to cheer on his beloved Brazilian national team led by Neymar in their ultimately failed attempt to claim a sixth World Cup crown. But since they were knocked out by Croatia in the quarter-finals, he switched allegiance to Brazil's arch rivals, Lionel Messi's Argentina.

"As a football fanatic I think Argentina deserve this title," said the 38-year-old odontologist upon his return to Sao Paulo. He cheered on Argentina during their 3-0 semi-final victory over Croatia on Tuesday that saw the South Americans qualify for tomorrow's final.

Dos Santos Junior even wears his light blue and white Argentina jersey "without shame" on the streets of Brazil's biggest city. He will put aside eternal debates such as who was better between Brazil's Pele and Diego Maradona of Argentina to support the Albiceleste against France. "Argentines are passionate about their teams and their national team, which has the bit between its teeth," he said. "Any football lover supports such a noble cause."

Earlier in the World Cup, Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni said that if his side could not win the tournament "I prefer that a South American team" does, even Brazil. But while 33 percent of Brazilians identify Argentina as their "second" team, more than 60 percent say they wouldn't want their neighbour to win the World Cup, according to a poll by the Brazilian data analysis institute.

The relationship between Argentines and Brazilians is a complicated one when it comes to football. After Argentina lost their opening World Cup match against outsiders Saudi Arabia, Brazilian social media was awash with jokes and memes, some playing on the famous "Don't Cry for me Argentina" song composed by British duo Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice and popularised in the musical Evita.

Yet it was Brazil crying first after they were knocked out. Argentines also had the last laugh during the 2021 Copa America as Messi and his teammates beat their historic rivals 1-0 in the final in Brazil's Maracana fortress. Videos circulating on social media even showed Argentina's players singing "Brazilian, what happened? The five-time champions cowered," in the changing rooms after Scaloni's team beat Croatia.



While 33 percent of Brazilians identify Argentina as their 'second' team, more than 60 percent say they wouldn't want their neighbour to win the World Cup, according to a poll by the Brazilian data analysis institute. *(Reuters)*

And yet some prominent Brazilian figures are right behind Argentina. The great Pele, who won the World Cup three times with the Selecao, celebrated Argentina's semi-final victory and the genius of Messi from his hospital bed in Sao Paulo, where he was originally admitted in late November for cancer treatment.

Brazil's former star striker Ronaldo, known as El Fenomeno (the phenomenon) during his career and who won the World Cup alongside Rivaldo, has picked France as favourites tomorrow. And while he says he would be happy for Messi to win the World Cup, he added: "I'm not going to be so hypocritical as to say I would be happy for Argentina."

His daughter Kelly published a social media post of Pele watching the match that included appreciative GIFs aimed at Messi. "There are no words for you @leomessi," former attacking midfielder Rivaldo, a World Cup winner with Brazil in 2002, wrote on social media. "God knows and he will crown you on Sunday, you deserve this title."

Messi, 35, is widely regarded alongside Pele, Maradona and Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo as one of the greatest players to ever grace the game. And there is only one trophy missing from his incredible career: the World Cup. Many Brazilians are as desperate to see him win it before he retires as they are to see their own hero Neymar, five years Messi's junior, do so.

"After Brazil were knocked out I started cheering for Argentina because Messi is the best player I have seen. He is playing at an impressive level and it's only right that he is crowned," said economist Alexandre Caldas, 49.

Caldas's eight-year-old son Bernardo is a huge Messi fan. "He's crazy about Messi, he wants him to win, to be the best in the world and is even learning Spanish so he can ask for his autograph," said Caldas, who has bought his son an Argentina football kit.

However, for some people the neighborly rivalry trumps everything. Brazil's former star striker Ronaldo, known as El Fenomeno (the phenomenon) during his career and who won the World Cup alongside Rivaldo, has picked France as favorites tomorrow. And while he says he would be happy for Messi to win the World Cup, he added: "I'm not going to be so hypocritical as to say I would be happy for Argentina."



Spotlight

The key ingredients in Argentina's revival recipe

With experienced Lionel Messi leading the show, World Cup winners Argentina seem to have hit a purple patch

ww.fifa.com
Doha

Unified, revitalised and with key players in form, Argentina head into the final in rude health – with many tipping them for the title.

There was a period around Diego Maradona's pomp when Argentina appeared poised to assume long-term residence at the apex of world football.

Successive FIFA World Cup finals under Carlos Bilardo arrived not long after the rousing, ticker-tape decorated home tournament triumph of 1978. The idea of Argentina as nearly men would have sounded preposterous back in those heady days.

But the world champions of 1986 – and CONMEBOL Copa America winners in 1991 and 1993 – gave way to Argentina teams that repeatedly tumbled at the final hurdle.

Four South American finals they reached between 2004 and 2016, and they lost the lot. The defeats in 2015 and 2016 were both inflicted by Chile on penalties, hot on the heels of Argentina falling short against Germany in the 2014 FIFA World Cup final.


An Argentina fan with Lionel Messi's name and number on the back of his shirt is seen in Doha. *(Reuters)*

It was illustrative of the mental toll of all those near misses that even serial top dog Lionel Messi fleetingly wondered if a ruinously pessimistic outlook was irreversibly entrenched.

"For me, the national team is over," he said in the wake of the second Chile heartbreak. "I've done all I can. It hurts not to be a champion."

Messi rowed back on his international retirement within two months.

"I love this country and this shirt too much," he explained, tellingly adding: "We need to fix many things in Argentinian football, but I prefer to do this from inside and not criticise from outside."

Whatever the endemic issues Messi sighted in his country's football, the long and short of it was Argentina needed to relocate the winning touch. They plotted an unsteady route to a losing final at Italy 1990, then atoned for that ultimate blow with back-to-back continental titles. After that, nothing.

There was no hint of Argentina bucking the modern trend in Russia four years ago. Jorge Sampaoli's team stumbled through their group and the 4-3 scoreline in a Round of 16 loss to France did not reflect the eventual champions' superior skill, speed and togetherness.

Why, then, do Argentina enter the 2022 World Cup's showpiece match against the same opponents with more than a puncher's chance? Why have we reached a point where ex-England defender Rio Ferdinand reckons "Lionel Messi and Argentina will be sitting there licking their lips" after watching France overcome Morocco in the last four?

Ferdinand pointed to an area of the field – France's left flank – where he feels Argentina can make merry. But without La Albiceleste's renewed belief and tenacity, the French wouldn't have cause to lose sleep over any minor fault.

Lionel Scaloni, appointed shortly after the 2018 World Cup, has moulded a balanced and industrious team that efficiently couples discipline with flair. There was familiar frustration at the outset of Scaloni's reign when a 2019 Copa America semi-final was lost to Brazil.

But in the same competition last year, Scaloni and Messi finally, crucially, obtained the hardware the nation craved.

That they shed the monkey from their back by beating Brazil in the Maracana Stadium provided an additional strand of confidence. Argentinian football felt good about itself again.

A degree of swagger and arrogance – in the positive sense – were on show when Argentina swept aside Italy at Wembley in June to win the Finalissima 2022.

"I'm grateful to all the people who wanted me to continue playing with Argentina," added Messi on that day he reneged on his retirement pledge. "Hopefully we can give them something to cheer about soon."

How those impassioned supporters following Argentina in Qatar are cheering now, wowed by a team that demonstrated courage by the bucketload to recover from the humbling experience of surrendering a 36-match unbeaten run against unfancied Saudi Arabia in their opening World Cup match.

Argentina have ominously moved through the gears and, in the view of former Manchester United midfielder Roy Keane, profited from essentially participating in a knockout tournament since their second game. By the time Croatia were overwhelmed in the semi-final, there was an unmistakable chutzpah about Argentina's football.

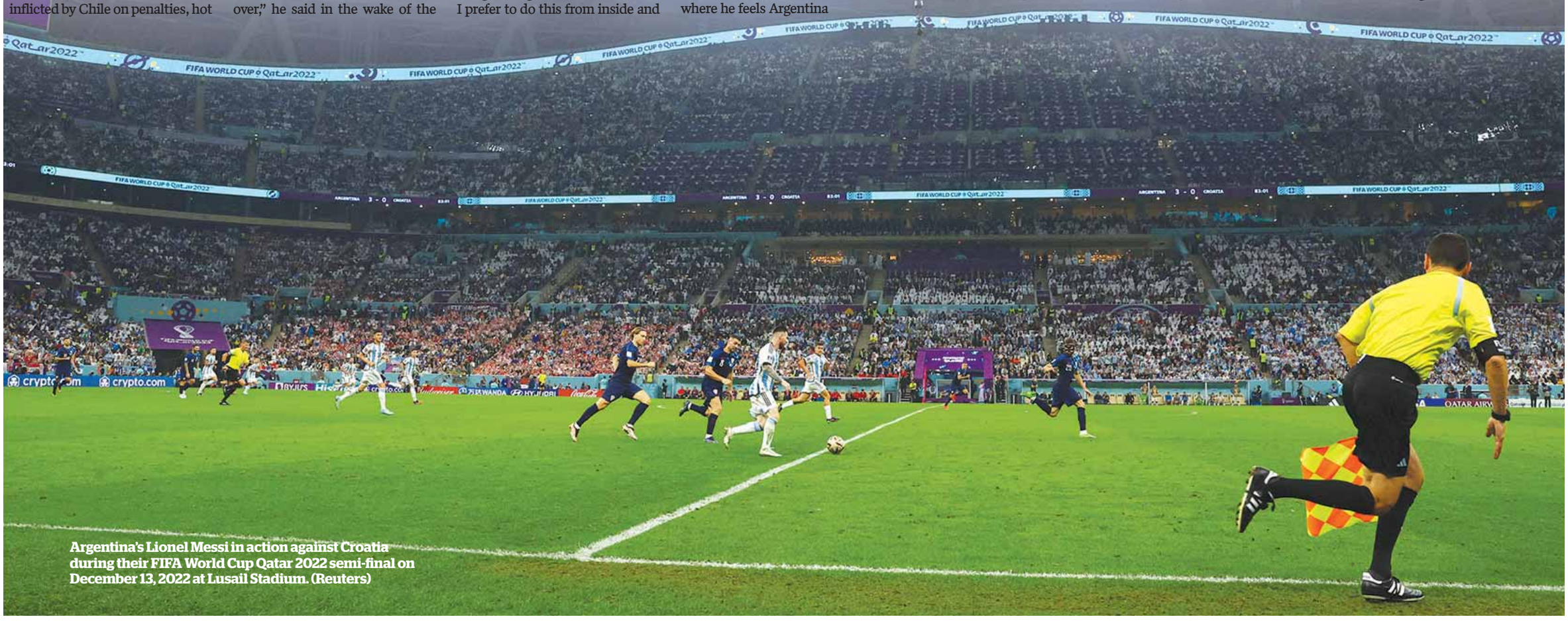
Their fearless young striker, Julian Alvarez, has four goals to add to Messi's five.

There is imagination and intelligence in abundance from Alexis Mac Allister, while the midfield trio of Enzo Fernandez, Rodrigo de Paul and Leandro Paredes – restored against Croatia when the adaptable Scaloni switched to a conventional back four – provide brains and legs and thrust and knowhow.

This is a visibly united team: sidelined players celebrate goals as if they've scored themselves and the Saudi Arabia upset kindled a collective motivation to disappoint those ready to savour Argentina's demise. "Everyone wanted us to lose," said Emiliano Martinez of the victory over Mexico that put the show back on the road. "It's us against the rest of the world." Whether the hunger for Argentina misery was real or imagined, it added one more layer to the multiple factors spurring on this team.

Goalkeeper Martinez, another asset, saved twice in the quarter-final penalty shootout victory over the Netherlands. Tossing away a two-goal lead towards the end of that match would likely have triggered thoughts of 'here we go again', were it not for the tangible success of the past 18 months.

Argentina have rediscovered the art of winning and Messi is in the goals and on a mission. Here we go again has taken on a whole different meaning.


Argentina's Lionel Messi in action against Croatia during their FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 semi-final on December 13, 2022 at Lusail Stadium. (Reuters)

Focus

Spanish Cup winner Busquets quits international football

AFP
Barcelona

Spanish midfielder and 2010 World Cup winner Sergio Busquets announced his international retirement yesterday.

"I would like to announce that after almost 15 years and 143 matches, the moment has arrived to bid farewell to the national team," wrote the 34-year-old Barcelona stalwart on his social media platforms.

Busquets is the last member of the 2010 team to bow out of international football – he was also part of the team that lifted the 2012 European title.

He was captain of the 2022 World Cup side that fell to a penalty shoot-out defeat to Morocco in the last-16.

Only his fellow 2010 teammates Iker Casillas (167) and Sergio Ramos (180) represented Spain more often than him.

"It has been an honour to represent my national team and help lift it higher, to being European and World champions.

"To have been captain and to have played so many matches with a certain level of success and always trying to do my best," Busquets wrote.


Spain's midfielder Sergio Busquets raises the trophy following the 2010 FIFA World Cup final against the Netherlands at Soccer City stadium in Soweto, suburban Johannesburg on July 11, 2010. Busquets announced his international retirement yesterday. *(AFP)*

He made his international debut in the build up to the South African World Cup where Spain wowed fans with their tika-taka passing game.

Alongside his Barcelona teammates Andres Iniesta and Xavi Hernandez, Busquets was at the heart of the World Cup and Euros double. Vicente del Bosque was coach of that team and had high praise for Busquets.

"He will transcend the generations due to his immense heritage," del Bosque said.

Busquets said from now on he would be "just another fan giving my unconditional support".

Former AC Milan and Bologna manager Mihajlovic dies

Rome: Sinisa Mihajlovic, who played for and coached numerous Italian Serie A teams and was famed for his spectacular free kicks, died yesterday after a long battle with cancer. Mihajlovic was sacked as manager of Serie A club Bologna in September after they failed to record a win in their first five league matches. The Serbian had become Bologna manager for the second time in 2019 and had been in charge while battling leukaemia.

His playing career included lengthy spells at Sampdoria and Lazio and he also managed Serbia.

"You fought like a lion on the pitch and in life... you are and you will always be a winner," Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said in a tweet as tributes began to flood in from inside and outside the football world.

Mihajlovic's death, confirmed by his family in a statement, went immediately to the top of the main newspapers' websites in Italy, where he played for most of his career. He also managed a number of clubs, including AC Milan. "Goodbye boss, you will always live in our hearts," Bologna said in a tweet. "Heaven has gained another legend. You will be sorely missed Sinisa," was the message from AC Milan.

A midfielder or defender, Mihajlovic scored a number of spectacular goals from free kicks. He made his name as part of the Red Star Belgrade team that won the European Cup in 1991. He moved to Italy the following year when he joined AS Roma and went on to play for Sampdoria, Lazio and Inter. He was part of squads that won Serie A title with Lazio in 2000 and then Inter in 2006 in his last season as a player.

His coaching career began at Bologna in 2008 and took in stints at Catania, Fiorentina, Sampdoria and Torino, as well as AC Milan, where he was in charge for less than a year.


In this file photo taken on August 14, 2003 Lazio Rome midfielder Sinisa Mihajlovic after scoring a goal against Benfica. *(AFP)*

Bottom Line

Algeria bid to host 2025 Africa Cup of Nations

AFP
Doha

Algeria has submitted a bid to host the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations, its football federation said yesterday, after Guinea was stripped of the tournament as its infrastructure is not ready.

"I am currently in Cairo and I have just officially submitted Algeria's application" to host the tournament, Algerian Football Federation (FAF) spokesman Salah Bey Aboud told public radio station Chaine 3.

The Cairo-based Confederation of African Football (CAF) has also received bids by Algeria's neighbour and arch-rival Morocco, as well as a joint bid by Nigeria and Benin, he said.

Algeria's sports and youth minister said Tuesday that the country's application was "solid and consistent".

"Unlike other bids, Algeria has facilities that are already operational," Abderezzak Sebgag told the APS official news agency yesterday. Algeria had already said in early October that it would bid to host the cup, days after Guinea's President Patrice Motsepe said the country had been stripped of the task. CAF will inspect facilities in January before announcing a final decision the following month.



Spot___light

PROBABLE STARTING LINE-UPS FOR FINAL

Argentina look set to keep Julian Alvarez in attack for tomorrow's World Cup final against France after he scored twice in a devastating combination with Lionel Messi in the semi-final

1 Emiliano Martinez
The 30-year-old Aston Villa goalkeeper, nicknamed "Dibu" for a freckled cartoon character, breathes confidence and charisma into the team from the back. He has pulled off some show-stopping saves in Qatar, including two in the quarter-final shootout against the Netherlands, joyfully dancing in front of fans and on a table in the changing room.



2 Cristian Romero
After the embarrassment of being part of a defence that let lowly Saudi Arabia score twice in their opening defeat at the World Cup, the 24-year-old Tottenham Hotspur centre back has recovered his poise and helped Argentina keep three clean sheets in their five-match winning run to the final.



3 Nicolas Otamendi
Romero's central defence partner, Otamendi, who plays for Benfica, is a decade older at 34 and has oozed experience in Qatar. He has helped Argentina's historically vulnerable defence show calm and solidity at the back in the main, with the exception of a mad five minutes against the Saudis and another crazy two-goal comeback by the Dutch before a shootout.



4 Nahuel Molina
The 24-year-old right back plays for Atletico Madrid and made his debut in mid-2021. He scored his first goal for the national side in the World Cup quarter-final against the Dutch, which Argentina won on penalties after a 2-2 draw.



5 Nicolas Tagliafico
The 30-year-old Lyon left back played superbly against Croatia in the semi-final and offers Argentina defensive solidity.
He could, though, be replaced by Marcos Acuna if coach Lionel Scaloni opts for a more forward-pressing lineup.



6 Leandro Paredes
A defensive midfielder with Juventus, 28-year-old Paredes has featured in four of Argentina's World Cup games — infamously booting the ball at the Netherlands' bench in the quarter-final. He might, though, be sacrificed for defender Lisandro Martinez should Scaloni decide to go with five at the back or for Angel Di Maria should he want to pack the front line.



7 Rodrigo De Paul
The tough 28-year-old Atletico de Madrid midfielder has been a stalwart in Scaloni's World Cup starting lineup, even playing through injury against the Dutch. He is loved by fans for being Lionel Messi's unofficial "bodyguard", always on his shoulder and shaking off unwanted attention.



8 Alexis Mac Allister
With a family name reflecting Irish and Scottish heritage connections, Mac Allister, 23, plays for Brighton in the Premier League. He made his debut for Argentina in 2019 but was then dropped from the squad until earlier this year, and scored his first goal for the "blue-and-white" against Poland in Qatar.



9 Enzo Fernandez
The 21-year-old Benfica midfielder, who is the subject of intense transfer rumours including a possible move to Liverpool, became Argentina's second youngest scorer at a World Cup — behind Messi — with his goal against Mexico. He followed it up less gloriously with a deflected own goal that set up a nervy finish in the 2-1 last 16 win over Australia.



10 Julian Alvarez
The 22-year-old speedy striker's start to life with Manchester City has been overshadowed by the brilliance of Erling Haaland, but in Qatar he has shone, eventually displacing Lautaro Martinez from the starting lineup and scoring twice in Argentina's comfortable semi-final win over Croatia.





ARGENTINA

11 Lionel Messi
Who does not know this little genius? The 35-year-old Paris St Germain forward is on a mission to lift his first World Cup at his fifth and final attempt and has been simply magnificent, scoring five goals while creating others with his dribbling and passing wizardry.

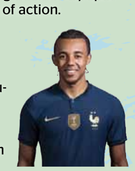


France's Didier Deschamps is likely to keep his usual starting XI for final, although he could make one key change in central defence as the defending champions look to contain the threat posed by Lionel Messi at the Lusail Stadium.

1 Hugo Lloris
Usually a slow starter at big tournaments, Lloris, France's first choice keeper and captain for over a decade, raises his level dramatically in the knockout phases and is known as one of the world's best shot stoppers.
However, his record in penalty shootouts has been poor, hence France will be eager to avoid the match being decided by spot kicks after 120 minutes of action.



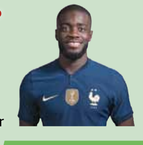
2 Jules Kounde
Kounde plays centre back in club football with Barcelona, but injuries have forced coach Didier Deschamps to field him at right back, a position he has begun to enjoy in Qatar. Solid defensively, he has yet to bring more going forward, but his overall performance has been more than satisfying.



3 Raphael Varane
The team's vice-captain, the boss of the defence. Varane missed the opening game against Australia with a hamstring problem but has improved steadily since then. His experience and calm demeanour will be key in controlling Lionel Messi and Julian Alvarez.



4 Dayot Upamecano
His physical presence is impressive, as well as his ability to bring the ball forward, a key element which helps France excel in quick transitions and counter attacks. He can be rock solid but also error prone, as his performance against England showed, when he could have conceded an early penalty for a foul on Harry Kane.



OR

4 Ibrahima Konate
Played the first game against Australia as Varane was not fit and made a big impression. He was equally impressive in the 1-0 group-stage defeat by Tunisia, the only player at world class level that day. He was given another chance to show his qualities in the semi-final against Morocco as Upamecano was ruled out with illness and he was France's best field player thanks to his sense of anticipation, which could tempt Deschamps to favour him over Upamecano.



5 Theo Hernandez
Owes his place in the starting line-up to his brother Lucas suffering a knee injury in the opening group game and has lived up to expectations. He can be dangerous while moving forward and his association with Kylian Mbappe is one of France's main assets. Scored an early goal against Morocco in the semi-finals.



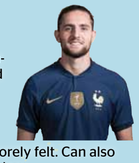
6 Antoine Griezmann
The renaissance man. After a rough few months at Barcelona, he returned to former club Atletico Madrid short on self-confidence. Deschamps' decision to play him in midfield turned out to be masterstroke as he has been scintillating in this new role. He is proving to be pivotal in defence and in attack, showing outstanding ability to play between the lines. He is the brains behind France's run to the final, and set up Olivier Giroud for the winner against England with a superb cross from the left flank.



7 Aurelien Tchouameni
The key man in front of the defence. In an attacking-minded team, his role is one of the most important to keep the balance and he has been doing a great job. His 25-metre goal against England also showed he could be a threat up front as well.



8 Adrien Rabiot
His midfield activity compensates for Mbappe's lack of defensive work. His pace and dedication have made him one of the pivotal players of the team in Qatar and his absence against Morocco was sorely felt. Can also strike from outside the box.



9 Ousmane Dembele
His dribbling abilities and speed is a defender's nightmare. After a good start to the tournament, where he also showed tactical discipline in defending on the right flank when needed, Dembele has been fading away, making poor choices. Will need to find his touch again in the final.



10 Olivier Giroud
Won his place in the starting line-up when Karim Benzema was ruled out injured just before the tournament and he duly delivered, becoming France's all-time top scorer with 53 goals. He scored the winner against England in the quarter-finals and his alliance with Mbappe is one of Les Bleus's main strengths. Had a poor game against Morocco so will be keen to step it up in the final.





FRANCE

11 Kylian Mbappe
The absolute star of the team, who scored five goals in his first four games. His devastating pace, ability to dribble in tiny spaces and his powerful strikes make him the man to mark in the French team. He failed to score against England or Morocco, who surrounded Mbappe with half a dozen defenders in the semi-final. The manpower Mbappe attracted in the semis handed Hernandez and substitute Randal Kolo Muani the freedom to score France's two goals. Whether he is scoring or not, Mbappe is always decisive as he looks to win his second World Cup before his 24th birthday.



Design: Jitendra Patel

SPORT

FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022

Spotlight

Floating midfielder Griezmann ready to sail France ship to title

The coach's main man on the pitch, Griezmann is the national team's best goal provider of all time with 28 assists

Reuters
Doha

Less than two years ago, Antoine Griezmann was wandering around like a lost soul in La Liga after a tough time at Barcelona and a rough return to Atletico Madrid but tomorrow he could lay claim to being France's greatest player.

While Kylian Mbappe will also be a double world champion if Les Bleus beat Argentina in the final at the Lusail Stadium and could win the tournament's Golden Boot, Griezmann has been the cornerstone of France's success since Didier Deschamps took over in 2012.

He has played in a record 73 consecutive matches for France, led them to the Euro 2016 final, was man-of-the-match in the 2018 World Cup final and this year has seamlessly switched roles to midfield to great effect.

A forward who was Euro 2016's top scorer and the silver boot winner as the second-highest goalscorer at the 2018 World Cup, Griezmann has adjusted his role after Deschamps was forced to recalibrate his midfield due to the absences of Ngolo Kante, Paul Pogba and Karim Benzema.

There was no sulking from Griezmann, who has been revelling in his new role — his guile, craft and poise making him the perfect player to wreak havoc between the lines.

"Being well physically helps me a lot. There are no problems in my private life," said Griezmann.

"In my head I had tough moments at Barca and last year when I came back to Atletico. It was complicated, I had to make myself very small, I had to find myself, on and off the pitch."

BIG AGAIN

Griezmann has grown big in stature again. Very big indeed. "Griezmann-Kante", Pogba labelled his teammate on social media after the 2-0 semi-final win against Morocco.

"He has surprised me but he has the quality and intelligence to do it. He looks more like Kante than Griezmann," said former Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba.

Griezmann's joie de vivre off the pitch has also been key to France's success.

Beside being the link between the midfield and the front line on the pitch, he has also created a great atmosphere within the squad, bridging the young generation with the team leaders.

The 31-year-old Griezmann has been leading the post-match celebration dances in the dressing room to the sounds of Gala's *Freed from desire* — yelling *'Vive la Republique, vive la France!'*

While he has not scored in his last 15 games for France, Griezmann has become the national team's best goal provider of all time with 28 assists.

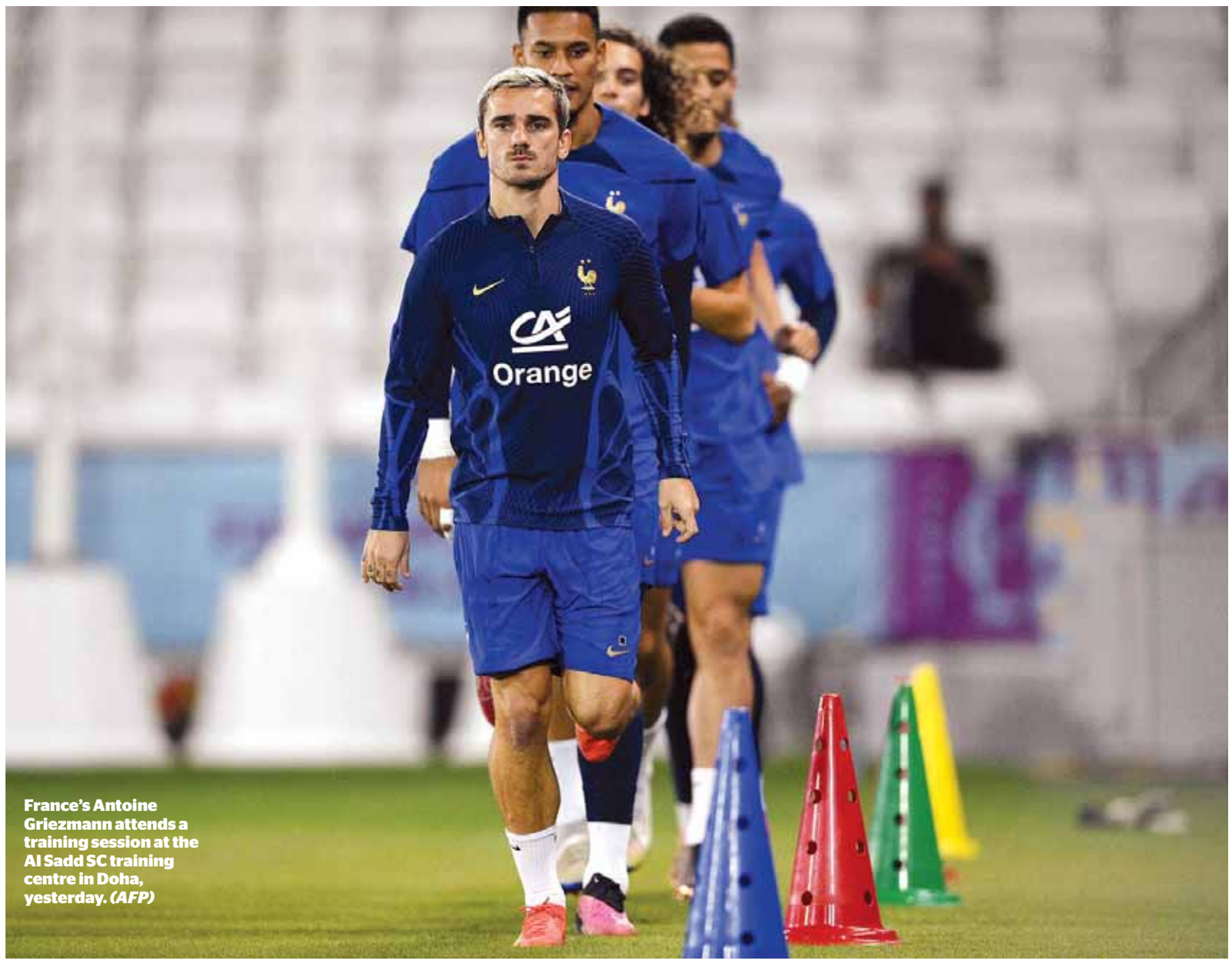
No wonder that he is Deschamps' main man on the pitch, the one he discusses tactics with.

While Griezmann feels he owes Deschamps a lot for always keeping faith with him, the coach is also aware of the player's importance.

"He's the type of player who can really change a team because he's so hard working and so technically gifted," said Deschamps.

"He's playing a slightly different role in this World Cup, but it suits him well. As I said earlier, he likes defending just as much as attacking and being a playmaker.

"Of course, his main responsibility isn't ball winning; his left foot is so wonderful, he creates great chances for others. He's someone who always thinks of the good of the team above everything else. He's extremely hard working, probably more so than most players."



France's Antoine Griezmann attends a training session at the Al Sadd SC training centre in Doha, yesterday. *(AFP)*

Horse Racing

Sealine claims Sheikh Jassim trophy



Wathnan Racing's Sealine (Qatar) trained by Alban Elie De Mieulle was ridden to a prestigious Late Sheikh Jassim bin Mohamed al-Thani trophy by jockey Ronan Thomas by almost a head length in the 1500m feature of Qatar Racing & Equestrian Club's (QREC) 20th race meeting on the turf of the Al Uqda racecourse, yesterday. HE Salah bin Ghanem bin Nasser al-Ali, Minister of Sports and Youth, crowned the winners of the Late Sheikh Jassim bin Mohamed al-Thani trophy. Ronan Thomas also rode Equinoxe (QA) to win for trainer Alban de Mieulle in the 2000m contest for 3YO+ local thoroughbreds, landing the Halul Island Cup (National Day Cup). Earlier, the Mohamed bin Hamad Khalifa al-Attiyah-owned and trained Lauderdale (IRE) won the Al Busayyir Cup as he ran out a half-length winner of the 1600m conditions for 3YO+ thoroughbreds under jockey Szczepan Mazur. The Osama Omer al-Dafea-owned and trained Taxiwala (IRE) completed a double on his third start this term, winning the Falcon Cup under Ronan Thomas in the 1200m conditions for 3YO+ thoroughbreds. Malki-owned and trained In The Night (IRE) added his fourth straight victory to his impressive record as he won the Gr3 Al Safliya Cup, a 2,350m race for 3YO+ thoroughbreds, with three lengths to spare under Tomas Lukasek. **PICTURES:** *Juhaim*



Focus

France's Deschamps on cusp of Cup history but happy to shun limelight

Reuters
Doha

No coach has ever won the World Cup twice in the post-World War II era but France's Didier Deschamps is one victory away from entering the record books when they take on Argentina in the final tomorrow in Qatar.

But ask the Frenchman about his chance at rewriting history when he can become the first to win the World Cup twice as a coach and once as a player, he steps away from the spotlight, happily allowing his beloved squad to be the focus instead.

"I'm not the most important thing here, the team is. Of course, I'm proud and we all know there's a chance now to defend our title in the final," Deschamps said.

"So that's a great achievement already. We'll do everything we can to ensure we're happier on Sunday evening.

"I don't really think about myself. I'm pleased with the fact that we've had this success." Deschamps is the fourth manager to lead a country to back-to-back World Cup finals after Vittorio Pozzo (Italy), Carlos Bilardo (Argentina) and Franz Beckenbauer (West Germany), with the latter two losing one final each.

But his lasting legacy will be uniting a France squad that, in the past, had been fractured by in-fighting and impertinence before building a squad that knew how to go deep in tournaments.

Having captained France's 'golden generation' that won the 1998 World Cup and the 2000 European Championship, the 54-year-old has now nurtured another golden generation over the past decade.



France coach Didier Deschamps (left) with players during training at Al Sadd SC Stadium, Doha, yesterday. *(Reuters)*

BUILD A SQUAD

As a coach, Deschamps guided France to the European Championship final on home soil in 2016 where they narrowly lost to Portugal in extra-time, the 2018 World Cup final where they thrashed Croatia and now the showpiece match in Qatar.

"We call him the lucky charm but the best quality of Deschamps is his ability to build a squad," former France international Patrice Evra said.

"Sometimes he won't pick the best players because his motivation is 'the team is the star'...He's someone who can build a squad to win a tournament. "He's just an amazing manager and he's so humble... For me he's the greatest French manager by miles!"

What also set Deschamps apart is his trust in youth despite the truckload of talent available to him.

That trust came to the forefront when he started the relatively inexperienced midfield duo of Youssouf Fofana and Aurelien Tchouameni — who had 25 caps between them — for the semi-final.

"Well, experience isn't everything, they have great qualities and they play at very top clubs," Deschamps said.

"Maybe they need experienced players to guide them, but they have quality...I had no doubt about putting them in there."

ADAPTABILITY

What has made Deschamps successful in tournaments, especially at the World Cup since 2018, is not sticking to a particular identity or philosophy which is often the defining feature of big teams. Instead, he has adapted to circumstances and opponents.There have been games where France have dominated possession while in others they have been happy to cede the ball and hit teams on the counter-attack. The second tactic worked wonders in the semi-final against underdogs Morocco, who had reached the last four playing with very little possession but struggled to make good use of the ball as France sat back.

"When you think you're close to winning against France, you're actually quite far. We will learn from this for the future, it leaves a bitter taste," Morocco coach Walid Regragui said.

"Didier Deschamps has shown he's the best head coach in the world in the last 10 years."

Glimpses of 2022













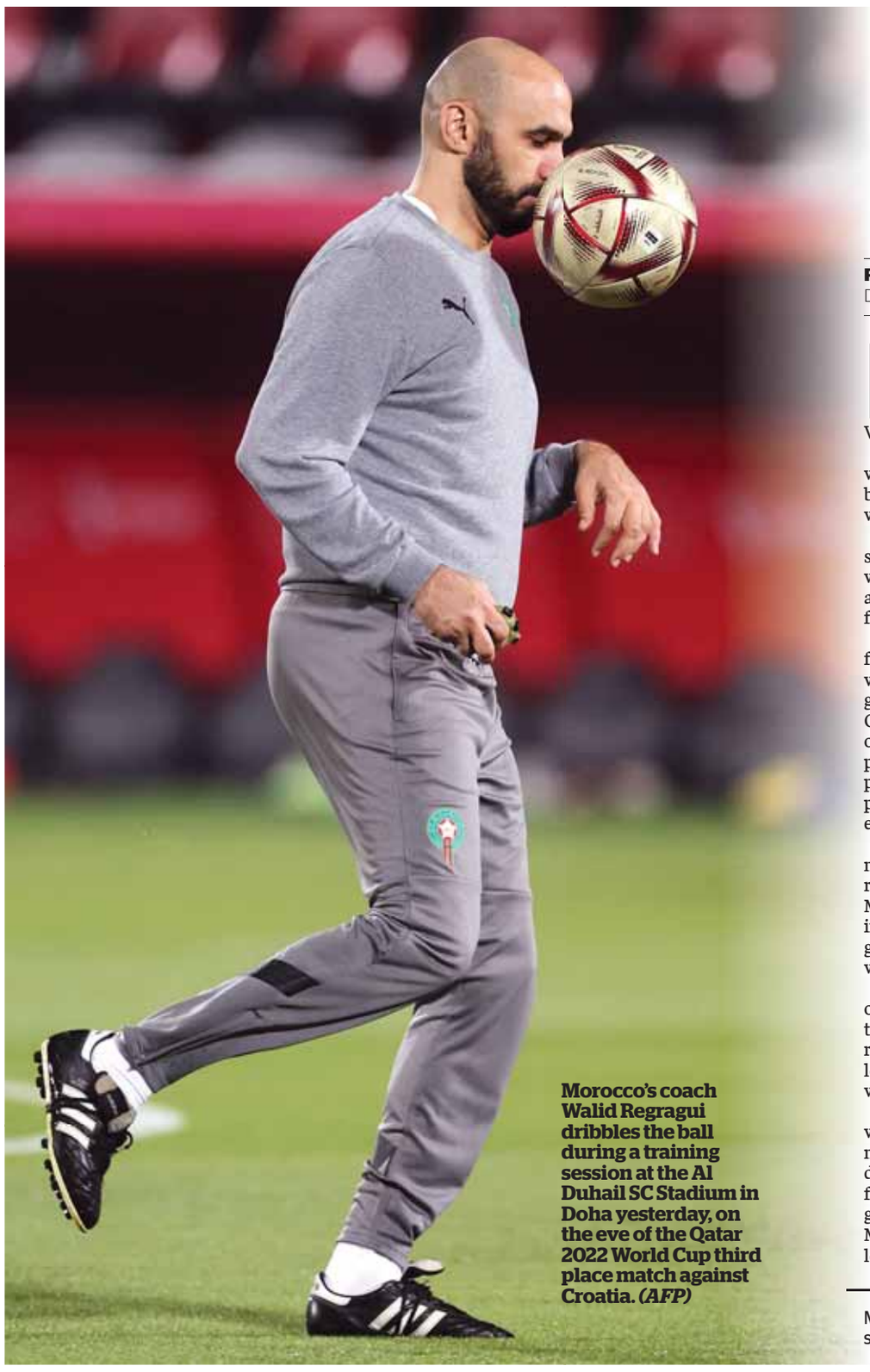




SPORT

Foc__us

‘Morocco playing 7 games at one World Cup is priceless’



Morocco’s coach Walid Regragui dribbles the ball during a training session at the Al Duhail SC Stadium in Doha yesterday, on the eve of the Qatar 2022 World Cup third place match against Croatia. *(AFP)*

‘MOROCCO PLAYED SIX WORLD CUP GAMES IN 20-ODD YEARS AND NOW WE’VE PLAYED SIX GAMES IN A MONTH’

Reuters
Doha

Morocco may not have reached the World Cup final but the players and supporters can take pride in the fact that they will leave Qatar having played seven games, a first for any African nation, coach Walid Regragui said yesterday.

Morocco’s dream run at the World Cup ended when they were beaten by reigning champions France in the semi-finals but they still have the opportunity to leave Qatar on a high when they take on Croatia in the third-place playoff yesterday.

Regragui said he would not make too many changes to the squad as that would upset the team balance but admitted it was a difficult and complicated game for two teams being asked to play after the disappointment of losing their semi-final matches.

“I understand it’s important to finish third rather than fourth, but my takeaway is we didn’t reach the final... We wanted to play the final on Sunday, not play tomorrow,” Regragui said. “But I told my players this is our seventh World Cup game. If you told any Morocco fan we would be playing our seventh game on Dec 17, they would be proud. Morocco played six World Cup games in 20-odd years and now we’ve played six games in a month - this is priceless. It’s as if we played two World Cups or even more, that’s beautiful from an experience point of view.”

Regragui said Croatia were a formidable team even if they had not been favoured to repeat their 2018 run, when they finished runners-up in Russia. Their dreams were crushed by Lionel Messi’s Argentina in the semi-final. “We knew Croatia were going to be one of the best teams in the competition. After the first game (where Morocco and Croatia drew 0-0 in the group stage) we knew the performance was very good,” Regragui said.

“A lot of people said Croatia were approaching the end of their cycle and would have the rug swept out from under their feet. Croatia got stick for not beating ‘underdogs’ Morocco but both teams reached the semi-final. “There was a lot of hesitation for the first game... Both teams will want to win it (on Saturday) and it will be a great game.”

The game could be Croatian midfielder Luka Modric’s last with the national team and Regragui praised the Real Madrid man who is still going strong at 37. “I don’t know if it’s Modric’s last game, he’s a competitive warrior and will want to finish his World Cup in style. When he wants to finish on a great note, we should be wary,” Regragui said. “Hats off to Modric. What he’s doing at 37 is monumental. He was a Ballon d’Or winner and I completely understand why.”



Morocco’s midfielder Sofyan Amrabat attends a training session at the Al Duhail SC Stadium in Doha yesterday. *(AFP)*

Wo__rry

France players hit by colds as Argentina final looms

Reuters
Doha

Several France players have caught colds, the French Football Federation (FFF) said, as they prepare for the World Cup final against Argentina, with Raphael Varane and Ibrahima Konate the latest to fall ill yesterday.

Centre back Dayot Upamecano and midfielder Adrien Rabiot missed Wednesday’s 2-0 semi-final win over Morocco with the illness.

Coach Didier Deschamps refused to panic after Wednesday’s game and said they were being careful to ensure the illness did not spread. Striker Randal Kolo Muani, who came off the bench to score France’s second goal in their win over Morocco, said yesterday: “There’s a little flu that’s been spreading but nothing serious. They’ll be well soon and be ready for Sunday.”

A French press officer added: “As you know, Randal is not a doctor, we will communicate about it later.”

Kolo Muani said the players who fell ill had been isolated.

“Those who are sick stay in their room, they’re being taken care of by the doctors and we’ve been enforcing social distancing. We’re very strict about it,” he said.

Forward Ousmane Dembele said: “We’re not scared of that virus. Dayot and Adrien got a bit of a stomach ache, I made them a ginger and honey tea and then they felt better. I hope everyone will be ready for the final. Dayot got better and I think everyone will be ready. We’ve been taking precautions. The first day, Dayot stayed in his room and we brought him food and he was back with everyone the next day.”

France midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni (knock on hip) and Theo Hernandez (knock on knee) missed training yesterday to work indoors, FFF said. Deschamps was confident both Upamecano and Rabiot would be fit for tomorrow’s showdown at the Lusail Stadium.

“Dayot will be fit. Since Saturday he wasn’t well for three days... had a fever and that had an impact on his strength,” he said on Wednesday.

“Given the tough match we had I decided not to play him and play Konate instead as he’s shown he’s good enough to play at this level.

“Rabiot was sick, was better this afternoon but not well enough so he stayed in the hotel. We have four days to rest so he should be better and available for Sunday.”

Should Konate and Varane be out, however, Deschamps would face a difficult selection decision, as he would be without two of his top three defenders.

Spot__light

Morocco’s World Cup run is like Croatia’s four years ago: Dalic

Reuters
Al Rayyan

Croatia are preparing for a “huge” match against Morocco in Saturday’s World Cup third-place playoff with the African team’s surprise run to the semi-finals reminiscent of Croatia’s own success at the 2018 tournament, said coach Zlatko Dalic yesterday.

Morocco, punching above their weight, beat Belgium and Canada in the group stage before eliminating 2010 world champions Spain on penalties in the last 16 and then beating 2016 European champions Portugal in the quarter-finals. Morocco’s dream run ended in the last four against France, who had beaten surprise finalists Croatia in the 2018 World Cup final, but they still became the first African and Arab country to reach a World Cup semi-final.

African football had suffered a crisis of confidence after the last World Cup in Russia, when none of the five teams made it out of the group phase, but that has now all changed with the performance of Walid Regragui’s team in Qatar.

“Morocco resemble us from four years ago. No one expected them to reach this stage,” Dalic said. “They deserve to be here. They will be a more challenging opponent than in the first match.”

“They have grown in self-confidence and are motivated. For both it is a huge and major match.”

Croatia and Morocco had drawn 0-0 in the group stage before both advanced to the knockout stage.

“For us it is a major match. We have a lot of respect for the Moroccan team. I think they have the same mindset as us. It is a huge match for them as well. They will come up with a major lineup.”



Croatia’s coach Zlatko Dalic leads a training session at Al Erssal Training Site 3 in Doha yesterday, on the eve of the Qatar 2022 World Cup third place match against Morocco. *(AFP)*

Croatia have several injury concerns with Josko Gvardiol, Marcelo Brozovic and Josip Juranovic doubtful but Dalic said he would take a decision at the last minute. “This is the seventh match in a month and we are a bit tired and drained. We have some issues with (Josko) Gvardiol, (Josip) Juranovic and (Marcelo) Brozovic. We will see what will happen. We have to be cautious.

“We need to be fair and if someone is not 100% fit we need to talk about it.”

‘Modric quite certain to play in Euro 2024 if Croatia qualify’

Croatia’s 37-year-old captain Luka Modric is likely to feature for the national team at the Euro 2024 tournament despite his age should the team qualify, Dalic.

The playmaker was their driving force in midfield as they beat tournament favourites Brazil on penalties in the quarter-finals before losing to Argentina in the last four.

Croatia face Morocco in the third place playoff on Saturday before Argentina face France in the final on Sunday.

“I hope that he will be there (at the Euro 2024),” Dalic said of the diminutive Real Madrid playmaker. “I am looking forward to it.”

“It is quite certain that he will there be but he will personally decide how he feels. I personally feel that he will be but it ultimately is his decision.”

Modric was player-of-the-tournament at the World Cup in Russia four years ago, when Croatia defied the odds to come from behind and go to extra time in an unprecedented three knockout matches, before losing to France in the final.

Germany will host the tournament between June 14 and July 14, 2024.