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SPOTLIGHT

World Cup burden proves too heavy for Qatar talisman Afif

Afif was asked to shoulder Qatar's creative burden, but he often found himself isolated high up the pitch

By Sahar Bidappa
Doha

When Qatar squad arrived in North America for only their second FIFA World Cup, one name carried the weight of a nation's expectations.

Akram Afif arrived as one of Asia's finest footballer - a two-time AFC Player of the Year, reigning Qatar Football Association Best (QFA) Player and the man who had inspired back-to-back Asian Cup triumphs. If Qatar were to finally make their mark on football's biggest stage after the disappointment of 2022 at home, the 29-year-old was expected to lead the way.

Just weeks before the tournament, after collecting his sixth QFA Best Player award, Afif made clear where his priorities lay.

"The individual awards is not my first priority. We did not perform at the required level at 2022 World Cup and the results were not acceptable to me. We will try our best to prove that we deserve to be at the World Cup with a strong performance," he said.

Instead, his second World Cup ended much like his first.

Afif finished the tournament without a goal or an assist as Qatar exited in the group stage with one point from three matches. For a player who scored eight goals to win the Golden Boot at the 2023 Asian Cup after supplying a record 10 assists during Qatar's 2019 triumph, it was another frustrating tournament where his influence never translated into numbers.

But the statistics also paint a more nuanced picture than the score sheet suggests. Afif was asked to shoulder almost all of Qatar's creative burden, yet he often found himself isolated high up the pitch. Across 239 minutes, he managed just two shots, neither on target, while accumulating an Expected Goals (xG) value of only 0.09 - evidence that he rarely received the ball in dangerous scoring positions.

Only two of his 128 touches came inside the opposition penalty area, highlighting how frequently he had to drop into midfield simply to get involved in Qatar's build-up.

Despite finishing without an assist, his Expected Assists (xA) stood at 0.34 after creating four chances, including one classified as a big chance. One of those moments nearly changed Qatar's fortunes against Bosnia and Herzegovina when his intelligent pass released Pedro Miguel, whose effort struck the post.

His passing accuracy remained a healthy 80.2 percent, while he completed almost half of his long passes, but too often there was little movement ahead of him to convert possession into genuine attacking threat.

Afif also found himself battling physically against defenders, winning just five of his 12 duels and being dispossessed four times as opponents focused much of their



Qatar's forward Akram Afif reacts after a missed chance during the FIFA World Cup match against Bosnia and Herzegovina in Seattle on Wednesday. (AFP)

defensive attention on neutralising Qatar's biggest weapon.

His performances mirrored Qatar's campaign. He showed flashes of quality in the opening 1-1 draw with Switzerland, struggled as the team's structure collapsed in the 6-0 defeat to Canada following two red cards, and worked tirelessly against Bosnia without receiving enough support in the final third.

Head coach Julen Lopetegui rejected suggestions that Afif had underperformed. "Today, I cannot agree with the criticism," the Spaniard said, after Qatar's 1-3 loss to Bosnia had crushed their knockout hopes.

"I think Akram Afif played a very good match. I need to review it again, but my first impression is that he did many things well for us. Every time he touched the ball he improved our attacking play. Of course, I would like to have two or three more players like him. He did not score, but he contributed a lot to the team and helped us in many ways. That is my opinion," the coach added.

Lopetegui's defence of his star player also reflects the broader challenge facing Qatar.

Afif himself is now 29 - the same as the average age of Qatar's World Cup squad. Ten of the 26 players were over 30, underlining how heavily the national team still

relies on the generation that transformed Qatari football.

Veteran captain Hassan al-Haydos, now 35, even returned from international retirement last year to help Qatar through qualification, further highlighting the dependence on an ageing core that delivered successive Asian Cup titles and the country's greatest footballing achievements.

That generation succeeded in elevating Qatar to the top of Asian football. Reproducing that success against the world's elite has proved a far tougher challenge.

Lopetegui believes the tournament should now serve as the bridge towards Qatar's next generation. "Overall, the experience has been very positive. Never before in our history had we qualified for this tournament. Never before had we won a point at a World Cup. And never before had we had a match where we competed on equal terms with an opponent and arguably deserved more," he said.

"Of course, people can have different opinions, but that is my summary. The most important thing now is for the young players in Qatar to learn from the experienced players in this squad. Unfortunately, many of those senior players are nearing the end of their careers and I do not know if this was their last match for the national team.

FACT BOX

AFIF'S 2026 WORLD CUP IN STATS

- Akram Afif's individual ratings steadily declined as the group stage progressed, mirroring Qatar's team collapse**
- vs Switzerland (1-1 draw): He played the full 90 minutes, benefiting from a structured team setup
 - vs Canada (6-0 loss): He was substituted early after 59 minutes as the team structure completely broke down following two red cards
 - vs Bosnia and Herzegovina (3-1 loss): He played the full 90 minutes, showing an improved work rate but lacking the final-third support to overturn the deficit.
 - Afif was heavily involved in Qatar's build-up play but struggled significantly with attacking efficiency and final-third execution.
 - Across 239 minutes at tournament play, Afif accumulated a total Expected Goals (xG) of just 0.09. This indicates that the shots he took were from highly unfavorable, low-probability positions.
 - He attempted only 2 shots during the entire tournament, with both failing to hit the target (0% shot accuracy). Both attempts were struck with his left foot - one from inside the box during regular play and one from a fast break outside the area.
 - Despite registering 0 assists, his tournament xA sat at 0.34. This metric demonstrates that he was creating legitimate scoring opportunities for his teammates that ultimately went unfinished.
 - He created 4 distinct chances, including 1 designated "big chance." He successfully completed 3 out of 11 attempted crosses (27.3% completion rate) and maintained a decent long-ball accuracy of 46.2% (6 out of 13).
 - He recorded 128 touches over the three matches but only 2 of those touches occurred inside the opposition's penalty box. This highlights that he was forced to drop deep into midfield to retrieve the ball rather than operating in dangerous advanced positions.
 - He maintained an overall passing accuracy of 80.2%, completing 73 passes. This shows he kept possession well in non-threatening zones.
 - Afif struggled heavily in physical duels, winning only 41.7% of them (5 out of 12). He was dispossessed 4 times and managed to win 4 fouls for his team.



At the World Cup, Akram Afif struggled heavily in physical duels, winning only 41.7% of them (5 out of 12). He was dispossessed 4 times and managed to win 4 fouls.

"The younger generation must take their example and learn from their professionalism and behaviour. Hopefully, that will help Qatar have another opportunity like this in the future. I do not know when it will happen again, but I hope it does."

For all the scrutiny surrounding Afif's tournament, expecting one player to carry Qatar on football's biggest stage was always an enormous ask.

At the Asian Cup, he thrived in a settled side that dominated possession against regional opponents. At the World Cup, facing faster, stronger and deeper squads, he became the focal point of every opponent's defensive plan while often lacking runners around him and sustained attacking support. Qatar undoubtedly needed more from their biggest star. But they also needed far more than just their biggest star.

FOCUS

Qatar coach Lopetegui calls Madibo's five-match ban 'exaggerated'



Assim Madibo was sent off during Qatar's 6-0 defeat on June 18 following a foul which resulted in Canada's Ismael Kone sustaining a broken leg.

By Sports Reporter
Doha

Qatar coach Julen Lopetegui has described FIFA's decision to hand midfielder Assim Madibo a five-match suspension as "exaggerated", insisting the midfielder should never have been sent off for the challenge that left Canada's Ismael Kone with a broken leg on June 19.

Speaking after Qatar exited the World Cup after a 3-1 defeat to Bosnia and Herzegovina on Wednesday, Lopetegui said he had deliberately avoided commenting before the match but questioned

both the red card decision and the length of the ban.

"I did not want to speak about this before the match because I did not want anyone to think I was focusing on the past," Lopetegui said.

"Now I can say that, in my opinion, the punishment is exaggerated. I reviewed the incident and I do not believe it was a red card. It was an unfortunate situation, but in my view it was not worthy of a red card."

Madibo was shown a yellow card after the 56th-minute challenge during Qatar's 6-0 defeat to Canada before referee Cristian Garay upgraded the punishment to a red card.

FIFA's Disciplinary Committee on Wednesday extended the automatic one-match suspension to five matches for serious foul play.

Lopetegui also questioned why the referee changed his decision without reviewing the incident on the pitchside monitor.

"The referee initially showed one decision and then changed it after receiving information from the VAR team," he said.

"My question is simple: if the referee had already seen the incident, why not review it himself on the monitor? If someone tells you something different from what you saw, surely it makes sense to check it yourself. I have not received an answer to that question.

That is why I believe the decision was wrong."

Kone suffered fractures to his tibia and fibula in the challenge and underwent surgery. Madibo later apologised to the Canada midfielder in person and, along with Qatar's sports minister HE Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani, visited him in hospital.

Images released by the Qatar Football Association showed the pair embracing.

The five-match suspension means Madibo served one game against Bosnia and will miss Qatar's next four FIFA competition matches, likely including fixtures at the 2027 AFC Asian Cup.



CRICKET

New Zealand's Latham, Conway pile on runs before late wicketes

Black Caps well-placed on 361-4 at stumps after opening day's play as the openers share 317-run stand

AFP

Nottingham

New Zealand's Tom Latham and Devon Conway broke a record that had stood for nearly a hundred years before England skipper Ben Stokes marked his return to international duty by sparking a late fightback on the first day of the third and deciding Test at Trent Bridge.

The Black Caps were still well-placed on 361-4 at stumps on yesterday's opening day, with this three-match series all square at 1-1. But they had been 317-0 while New Zealand captain Latham, capitalising on winning a good toss in sweltering heat, made 151 and fellow left-handed opener Conway 157 before they were both dismissed in the final session to spark a mini-collapse.

The two 34-year-olds' partnership was the highest for any New Zealand wicket in a Test against England, surpassing the 276 shared by Stewie Dempster and Jackie Mills at Wellington back in 1930. Not for the first time, however, it was Stokes, recalled alongside paceman Gus Atkinson after missing the hosts' crushing 253-run defeat in the second Test at the Oval for breaking a midnight curfew celebrating his side's win in the series opener at Lord's, who broke through for England.

Seam-bowling all-rounder

Stokes, almost by force of will, had Latham edging a good-length delivery and wicketkeeper Jamie Smith, who had dropped the New Zealand skipper on 129 after sitting out New Zealand's mammoth victory at the Oval on paternity leave, made no mistake.

England's 317-1 became 319-2 in the next over when Conway holed out to part-time off-spinner Joe Root, with substitute fielder Matt Fisher taking a fine running catch at long-on.

Rachin Ravindra carelessly skied Atkinson to Smith and next ball Henry Nicholls, fresh from his century at the Oval, fell for 36 to what became the last ball of the day when caught behind off fast bowler Jofra Archer. But the day still belonged to New Zealand, with Conway, telling Sky Sports he was "pretty happy with the way things have gone".

Latham and Conway's four previous partnerships this series - two, nought, 14 and eight - gave no indication of the pair's run-spree on Thursday but they cashed in on ideal batting conditions.

"We knew that the wicket was going to be quite nice," said Conway, who made a round trip of 23,000-miles (37,000 kilometre) to New Zealand between the first and second Tests to see his newborn baby. "It was important for us to put pressure on the bowling."

He added: "It's a little disappointing to have lost two wickets at the end but we've got a lot of

batters in the shed so hopefully we can kick on."

Recalled off-spinner Shoaib Bashir, who hadn't bowled in a Test in more than a year, almost had Conway out for 18 when a mistimed drive off a well-flighted delivery just evaded a diving Root at short extra-cover. Stokes brought himself on, to cheers from the crowd, for the 20th over, with New Zealand 64-0 but Conway drove his second ball for four.

Latham completed a 149-ball hundred with successive boundaries off Stokes - a slashing cut followed by a leg-glance. It was his 17th century in 95 Tests.

New Zealand were 213-0 at tea, with Latham 109 not out and Conway unbeaten on 94. Conway got to his eighth hundred in 36 Tests with consecutive fours off Bashir, lofting him over wide long-on and square-driving him through point. He then struck superb sixes in successive overs, lofting a Bashir full-toss high over deep mid-wicket and pulling Tongue over long leg. Conway was on 130 when a diving Ben Duckett could only get the tips of his fingers to a tough chance at square leg.

Latham, however, should have been out for 129 when he gloved Atkinson down the legside only for Smith to miss the routine chance as the ball went straight through his gloves and hit his chest.

BRIEF SCORES: New Zealand 361-4 for 4 (Latham 151, Conway 157).



New Zealand's Devon Conway (left) and Tom Latham celebrate during their 317-run partnership on the first day of the third Test against England at Trent Bridge in Nottingham yesterday. (AFP)

TENNIS

Dominant Osaka sails into Bad Homburg Open semi-finals

AFP

Bad Homburg, Germany

Four-time Grand Slam winner Naomi Osaka advanced to the semi-finals of the Wimbledon warm-up tournament in Bad Homburg Open after a dominant victory over Ekaterina Alexandrova yesterday.

The Japanese sixth seed won 6-2, 6-2 in just 59 minutes to reach the final four of the grass court tournament just days from the start of Wimbledon.

Osaka, the world number 15, is one win away from a first grass-court final of her career. "Obviously I can't say that I've had much experience on grass, but I feel really good right now," Osaka said, adding that coach Tomas Wiktorowski, who started working with her last July, "is helping me understand grass a lot more, so I feel pretty comfortable at this point."

Osaka was broken early in the opening set but swiftly struck back against the unseeded Russian. Osaka won eight straight

games - a run which included 15 points in a row - as she took the opening set and ran out to a 3-0 lead in the second.

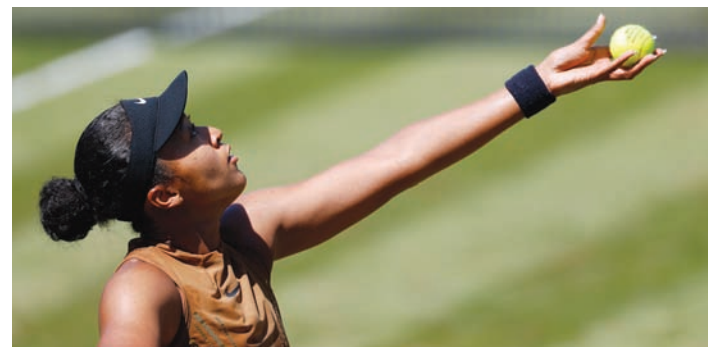
The 19th-ranked Alexandrova rallied to win her next two service games but Osaka closed out the match in just under an hour.

Osaka will play Chinese world number 52 Wang Xinyu, who reached the final four when eighth-ranked Ukrainian Elina Svitolina pulled out citing exhaustion on Wednesday. Fourth seed Karolina Muchova also made the last four after coming from a set down to beat Dane Clara Tauson 1-6, 6-2, 6-4 on Thursday.

Tauson exploded out of the gates and broke the world number 11 three times while dropping just one game in the opening set.

Muchova returned the favour in the second, breaking Tauson three times to set up a deciding set, which she won to take the match in two hours and three minutes.

The Czech will face off against Romania's Elena-Gabriel Ruse in the semi-finals. Ruse beat American Emma Navarro 6-4, 6-2 in one hour and 15 minutes earlier.



Japan's Naomi Osaka in action during her Bad Homburg Open quarter-final against Russia's Ekaterina Alexandrova yesterday. (Reuters)

Evert to miss Wimbledon after cancer recurrence

Tennis great Chris Evert will be absent from this year's Wimbledon championships as she is undergoing treatment following a recurrence of ovarian cancer. "I have already undergone surgery as the first step in my treatment and recovery, and will begin chemotherapy in the coming weeks," three-times Wimbledon champion Evert, who now commentates on the sport, said yesterday in a statement on X. "Because of this, I will not be attending Wimbledon this year, and I will step back from my professional commitments over the next few months to focus on my health. Ovarian cancer is relentless, but I will stay optimistic and determined in continuing to fight this battle."

The 71-year-old, an 18-times Grand Slam singles champion, was first diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2021. She suffered a recurrence in 2023 before saying she was cancer-free again in 2024. Her long-running rivalry and close friendship with Martina Navratilova - including their shared battles with cancer - will be featured in the Netflix documentary, "Chris and Martina: The Final Set", due for release on June 26.

DUHOK TO HOST INAUGURAL GULF CLUB SUPER CUP ON AUGUST 13

The Gulf Cup Football Federation has officially announced the launch of the inaugural Gulf Club Super Cup 2026, a new competition designed to further enhance Gulf football and strengthen regional sporting ties.

The historic first edition will feature Iraq's Duhok, winners of the inaugural Gulf Club Champions League, against Qatar's Al Rayyan, champions of the tournament's second edition.

The match is scheduled to take place on August 13, 2026 in Duhok, Iraq, marking a significant

addition to the Gulf football calendar. The federation expects the event to generate strong public engagement and extensive media coverage across the region.

Commenting on the announcement, Jassim Sultan al-Rumaihi, Secretary-General of the federation, praised the efforts of Duhok SC in completing the organisational preparations required to host the match. He also commended the support and cooperation of the Iraqi Football Association in facilitating the event. Al-Rumaihi stated: "We are pleased to see Gulf

competitions reach new horizons. The organisation of the Gulf Club Super Cup represents an important milestone in the development of football across the region and reflects the significant progress achieved in recent years at all levels."

The launch of the Gulf Club Super Cup underscores the federation's commitment to expanding its portfolio of competitions, promoting greater sporting excellence, and enhancing the profile of Gulf football on the regional stage.

FOCUS

'Vondrousova 'should appeal' against ban'

AFP

Prague

The lawyer for Marketa Vondrousova told AFP yesterday that he believes the former Wimbledon champion "should appeal" against the four-year ban handed down this week for missing a doping control.

The International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) blames the 26-year-old Czech for failing to open her door to an anti-doping officer in December 2025.

The 2023 Wimbledon winner claimed in April she was scared when the officer rang the bell "without properly identifying themselves or following protocol".

"This decision will ultimately be Marketa's, of course, but from the beginning I've been advising her that I think she should appeal, that she should fight, because in my view it shouldn't end with this kind of career-destroying sanction," her lawyer Jan Exner told AFP.

"So I'll recommend it to her again, but the final decision will be hers."

Exner also suggested that if the ban stays in place, it could mean Vondrousova stepping away from the game.

"When you get four years



for doping, it's an idea that pretty much has to cross your mind, because it's basically a career-ending punishment," he said.

"Yeah, and the statistics are such that the vast majority of athletes never come back from this kind of ban. So it basically amounts to a lifetime ban."

"But of course I hope it won't turn out that way and that Marketa will keep fighting."

In an interview with The Times, published on Thursday, Vondrousova admitted she has

been left "completely broken" by the decision.

"I immediately started to cry," said Vondrousova.

"Like, what the hell? How can the this be? It's like you have no power over anything. I told the truth, but one side of the story was heard and it's not mine."

"For me, it's career-ending. I'm 27 (on Sunday). It's not like you are 19 or whatever. Overall, four years, it's the craziest thing."

Vondrousova, who has never tested positive for doping, claims the doping control officer failed

to show their official ID after ringing her doorbell.

She says she was alone at home and "scared".

"I felt really under pressure and I just panicked," said Vondrousova.

"I decided to go down and check the situation and when I came down in the elevator, she was standing in the middle of an open door."

"I went out and she stepped out as well. She told me, 'You have to do the test. You have to let me in!'"

"I was like, 'I don't know you, I've never seen you. I'm scared. I'm not going to let you in.'"

The stand-off continued until Vondrousova agreed to sign the form, she says for her own safety.

The ITIA maintains that Vondrousova came downstairs with her dog and went for a walk once she had signed the form.

"They are saying from our side, everything was OK. She went out with the dog. She signed it. That's it. End of story," she says.

"It's not this easy. We've all been in the hearing and (the officer) admitted everything, so for me, it's really scary."

In a statement to The Times, the ITIA said: "In this specific case, there are clear rules and we were left with no choice but to charge the player after she refused a test."

MAYWEATHER'S ATHENS FIGHT WITH ZAMBIDIS IS OFF: REPORT

Former multi-weight world boxing champion Floyd Mayweather's planned exhibition against Greek kickboxing star Mike Zambidis in Athens tomorrow is off, according to federal court filings obtained by ESPN. The pay-per-view event was to be held at the Telikon Center at the OAKA Olympic Complex in Athens.

Events company CSI, which is suing Mayweather in connection with planned bouts against Mike Tyson and Manny Pacquiao, had sought an injunction in the Southern District Court of New York to prevent the

Zambidis exhibition. In a letter to the court, ESPN reported, attorney Melissa Glass said the Mayweather-Zambidis event will no longer proceed because uncertainty over its status "effectively stopped any promotion or distribution plans for the event and halted ticket sales."

She said the bout against the 45-year-old Zambidis, an 18-time world champion best known for his career in K-1 MAX, could be rescheduled. CSI sued Mayweather last week seeking to recover at least \$4.65mn the company says it paid the fighter for exclusive

rights to promote the planned bouts against Tyson and Pacquiao.

Mayweather, 49, retired from boxing in 2017 with a perfect 50-0 record. He has appeared in exhibition bouts since then, but a planned exhibition late last year against former heavyweight world champion Tyson never materialized and plans for a rematch with Filipino icon Pacquiao, announced by Netflix for September, is shrouded by uncertainty. That bout, announced for the Sphere in Las Vegas, would have rematched the fighters in the top moneyspinner in boxing history.

FOOTBALL

South Africa take surprise place in knock out stages

'I'M VERY PROUD OF THE PERFORMANCE OF MY TEAM'

Reuters
Monterrey, Mexico

Dismissed by the pundits as no-hopers, South Africa turned their anger into rocket fuel and blasted into the World Cup's knockout stages for the first time with a 1-0 win over South Korea on Wednesday night.

After a hapless display in their opening game against co-hosts Mexico at Azteca Stadium and a fortuitous penalty that earned them a point against the Czech Republic in their second fixture in Atlanta, a transformed and more attacking line-up leaped into the runners-up berth in Group A with victory over South Korea in Monterrey. "This team was under immense pressure, not only on the field but off the field," said captain Ronwen Williams.

"And for the players to show up, when our backs were against the wall ... I mean, when I saw the publications posting potential teams to go at the group stage and we were given no chance, you know that fuels something inside of us, that everyone is against us. We used that as motivation and as energy to fight. And the fight that the guys showed ... amazing."

It is the first time in four attempts that they have progressed past the group stage. In 2010 when the World Cup was held in South Africa, they suffered the ignominy of being the first host nation to be eliminated at the first hurdle.

"I think we played a very good game, tactically," coach Hugo Broos said. "Everybody did their job. The difference between this game and our previous match (against the Czechs) was that when we had the ball we were very dangerous, and that was very important," coach Broos. "We had very quick players on the pitch and used them all, finding the spaces."

But poor finishing has always been the hallmark of South African football, and it took until the 65th minute before they broke the deadlock. "We had a few chances



South Africa's Thapelo Maseko celebrates with Thalete Mbatha after scoring against South Korea in Monterrey, Mexico. (Reuters)

in the first half and I told the players at halftime to keep on believing. I'm very proud of the performance of my team," said the 74-year-old Belgian coach, who retires after the tournament.

Goalscorer Thapelo Maseko, whose South African club Mamelodi Sundowns loaned him out in January when he could not make the team, has been catapulted to national hero status. "I feel like I'm dreaming. I missed some goals, I missed some chances. But in the end I was able to help the team. We prevailed, and that is all that matters," the 22-year-old said.

Dropping captain Son Heung-Min to the bench might be the defining decision of the World Cup for South Korea coach Hong Myung-

Bo. Son was not in the starting XI on Wednesday night and South Africa pulled off a 1-0 win in what Hong admitted post-match was failed strategy that leaves South Korea with a cliffhanger few days. Advancing to the round of 32 is now dependent upon results from third-place finishers in other pools. South Africa leapfrogged to second in Group A, ahead of South Korea.

"We thought that Son would be better placed when the opponents were losing their energy, not when they had a lot of energy," Hong said of not starting Son. "And when there were more spaces to exploit between the opponents' defensive line, that's when we wanted Son to be at his strongest - when the opponents were a bit weaker."

After entering as a sub, Son had one shot in the match. Hong admitted he might not make the same decision if presented another opportunity, but a knockout stage match is now in serious doubt.

"In terms of the process and preparing for this game, and how we would play on the field, that is something I put much thought into," he said. "Of course, if we knew what the result was going to be, I probably would have made different choices. But I had a strategy in mind. Whenever such a bad result happens, everyone has their own opinion. The result is really the responsibility of the head coach. Ultimately, it comes down to my hands."

FOCUS

Ochoa gets perfect Azteca send-off as Mexico beat Czechs

Reuters
Mexico City

If Wednesday's World Cup match marked the last time Guillermo Ochoa appears in Mexico colours, the 40-year-old goalkeeper could not have wished for a better send-off.

Brought on for the last 12 minutes with his team 2-0 up against the Czech Republic and cruising into the knockout phase as Group A winners, Ochoa lapped up the acclaim of fans at the Azteca stadium, the venue where he made his senior debut with Club America in 2004.

Making his sixth and final appearance at the World Cup, Ochoa maintained the clean sheet began by Raul Rangel as Mexico scored again late on to finish 3-0 winners.

Mexico will play at the Azteca in the round of 32 but barring a goalkeeping emergency he is unlikely to get on the pitch. The veteran keeper, instantly recognisable by his curls, was content with his role.

"My first game, Azteca. My last game, Azteca. It's been a beautiful final chapter of my ca-

reer," he said. "Thank you, everyone."

Roared on by a crowd dressed in green, white and red, Mexico did not overwhelm the Czechs but were worthy winners thanks to goals from Mateo Chavez, Julian Quinones and Alvaro Fidalgo. The whole venue saluted Ochoa at the final whistle, a proper show of respect for a player whose flying saves and one-man acts of defiance became part of Mexican footballing folklore.

"He's an example for all of us. He's the first one in the gym and the last one to leave," Chavez said of Ochoa. "This is the icing on the cake of a great career. He's an idol for us, he's helped guide the group with his experience, and I'm very happy for him."

For supporters, everything has followed the ideal script: a home World Cup, a perfect group run, and a legend walking off with the chants of his name ringing in his ears.

They are already daring to talk about the prospect of a long-awaited return to the World Cup quarter-finals. Mexico have only reached that stage twice - in 1970 and 1986. When they were hosts.



Mexico's players lift up goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa after winning the World Cup Group A match against Czech Republic at the Mexico City Stadium in Mexico City. (AFP)

Bagnaia signs 4-year deal with Aprilia

Francesco Bagnaia has signed a four-year contract with Aprilia, the team said yesterday, a day after Ducati confirmed the departure of the two-time world champion, to be replaced by KTM's Pedro Acosta from next year. Bagnaia will join Aprilia from the start of MotoGP's 2027 season, forming an all-Italian partnership at the Noale-based team alongside Marco Bezzecchi.

"Bagnaia's arrival is a confirmation of the value of Italian sport, which in recent months has distinguished itself on the world stage thanks to the achievements of Kimi Antonelli in Formula 1, Jannik Sinner in tennis, and Federica Brignone at the Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026," Aprilia Racing CEO Massimo Rivola said. "Having a multiple world champion is a responsibility we can't wait to take on." Bagnaia will make his final appearance for Ducati at the Valencia Grand Prix at the end of November, bringing an end to a successful eight-year stint with the Italian manufacturer.

FORMULA 1

Antonelli welcomes Mercedes upgrade, Russell says beware Hamilton



Mercedes' Andrea Kimi Antonelli at the team garage yesterday, ahead of the Austrian Grand Prix at the Red Bull Ring racetrack in Spielberg, Austria. (AFP)

AFP
Spielberg, Austria

Formula One leader Kimi Antonelli said on Thursday that a Mercedes upgrade would help him bounce back from a first defeat of the year but team-mate George Russell warned that Lewis Hamilton was back to his 'beautiful best'.

Russell, a 28-year-old Briton, was the pre-season favourite for the drivers' title until his teenage Silver Arrows partner Antonelli reeled off a record run of five consecutive wins, a streak that Hamilton ended in Barcelona on June 14. It was Hamilton's first victory for the 'scarlet scuderia' after two consecutive second places. He climbed to second in the title race, 41 points behind Antonelli, who retired in Spain, and nine ahead of Russell. Antonelli is keen to rebound at the Austrian Grand Prix, an event that was on Thursday declared a "heat hazard" by the International Motoring Federation (FIA) with temperatures set to hit 38 degrees Celsius or higher forecast across the race weekend. Sunday's race will be followed by the British, Belgian and Hungarian Grand Prix before the four-week summer break.

"I think these are all tracks where our car should adapt well," Antonelli told a press conference. "So far this year, we've mainly struggled on circuits with

older asphalt and low grip.

"The Red Bull Ring should be more favourable than Barcelona was for us, even though we're expecting very high temperatures. It's a very demanding track for the car, especially since the altitude reduces the amount of available oxygen.

"Having a fresh power unit is definitely good news." His team-mate Russell, meanwhile, was full of praise for Hamilton, a seven-time champion and former Mercedes star. "Kimi is still very much the driver out in front and he is performing incredibly and consistently but Ferrari feel like they're coming - and Lewis is at the forefront."

"It was great to see Lewis back doing what he does best," said Russell of the 41-year-old Hamilton's record-increasing 106th career win. "People were writing Lewis off last year, or even the year we were team-mates in 2024. Is he too old? Is he this or that? Then he goes and does it. He has been smashing it for the last four or five races. "You don't forget how to drive overnight. But you need yourself, your team, the set-up, the understanding of the tyres - you need everything to click and when it does, you fly - and like it was with Lewis, it's beautiful." Sunday's race is the first this year to be declared a 'heat-hazard' event under an FIA rule introduced last year for races with temperatures in excess of 31 degrees.

HAMILTON REVEALS NECK INJURY THAT HAMPERED DEBUT YEAR WITH FERRARI

Lewis Hamilton on Thursday revealed that he suffered a significant neck injury in testing ahead of his debut season with Ferrari last year - and that it left him in pain for three months.

Speaking to reporters ahead of this weekend's Austrian Grand Prix, the seven-time champion - who has returned to his best form and claimed his first Ferrari win in Spain two weeks ago - said he had crashed "very hard" at the Circuit de Catalunya in January, 2025. "It's private," he said, referring to the test with Ferrari. "But I hit the wall very hard last year in testing and knocked out a disc in my neck, which went into the nerve. "I couldn't do a lot for like nine weeks. I was just having chiropractors every day, physio every day... I couldn't sleep. I was on painkillers and had to get injections.

"I did everything I could to try to fix it. That's basically what I was trying to live with - which is not easy in the seat position that you're in."

The 41-year-old Briton did not elaborate on how much effect the injury had in his first disappointing season with Ferrari and also swerved questions about his revival and possible bid for an outright record eighth drivers' world title. "I'm not thinking about the championship," he said. "I'm thinking about each race, arriving and executing the way we did last weekend at the last race. "Because with the pit stops, the strategy, and that we are all in sync and having that every single weekend is the most important thing. Not thinking about what's going to happen in 15 races time. "So, I'm thinking about tomorrow. I'm thinking of one day at a

time. I'm really, really proud of the whole team.

"Every person brings something to the table and everyone's levelling up, pushing that extra bit harder than maybe they did before. We're working more cohesively, more tight-knit than ever with great leadership from Fred (Vasseur)."

He complimented the team on delivering a stream of upgrades and improvements, including a new power unit.

"With the engine, it's not the whole step, but it's one foot forward," he added. "And that's what we have got to keep doing." Hamilton's maiden win for Ferrari and record-increasing 106th of his career in Spain lifted him to second in the drivers' title race, 41 points adrift of series leader Italian teenager Kimi Antonelli of Mercedes.



Ferrari's Lewis Hamilton takes cover under an umbrella amidst the heatwave at the Austrian Grand Prix in Spielberg, Austria, yesterday. (Reuters)



SPOTLIGHT

Ancelotti hails Vinicius as Brazil march on to last 32

Vinicius scores twice in the first half in Miami against Scotland as Brazil progress as Group C winners

AFP
Miami

Brazil coach Carlo Ancelotti hailed Vinicius Junior as "one of the best players in the world" after the Real Madrid forward continued his excellent World Cup form with a brace in Wednesday's 3-0 win over Scotland.

Vinicius scored twice in the first half in Miami, including a header, to set Brazil on their way to a victory which allowed them to progress to the last 32 as winners of Group C.

"I had no doubts about how he would be coming into this World Cup," said Ancelotti of the 25-year-old, who has four goals in three games at this year's tournament.

"For him it is an honour to play for the national team. He is playing well and he even scored a header, which is very rare for him. I knew all about what Vini could do. He is one of the best players in the world," added Ancelotti, who managed the forward for four years at Real Madrid.

Vinicius scored in Brazil's opening 1-1 draw with Morocco and then also netted in the 3-0 defeat of Haiti. He is level with France's Kylian Mbappe and Norway's Erling Haaland in the golden boot race, with that trio all one behind Lionel Messi.

He is the first Brazilian to score in all three group matches at a World Cup since Ronaldo and Rivaldo both achieved the feat in 2002. The only other Brazilian players to find the net in all three group games are Jairzinho, in 1970, and Romario in 1994 - that is illustrious company to keep, and Brazil went on to lift the trophy every time one of their players did that in the past.

"I always say I am not that bothered about numbers. I am not used to scoring so many goals, but the coach has moved me into a position to which I have adapted



Brazil's Vinicius Junior heads the ball to score against Scotland during the World Cup Group C match in Miami Gardens on Wednesday. (AFP)

well, and now I am scoring and helping the team," Vinicius said.

Vinicius, who came second in the Ballon d'Or in 2024, netted 22 goals in 53 games in all competitions for Real last season. "Hopefully I can keep going to the final. I am very happy with the work being done by the team. If everyone is playing well, the ball will arrive in attacking areas and we will have chances to score goals," he added.

Matheus Cunha got Brazil's other goal against Scotland, before the Manchester

United player was replaced by Neymar for his first appearance for his country since October 2023.

"He deserved to come on. He has worked hard and trained hard to recover fitness. He has done it very professionally," Ancelotti said of Brazil's all-time top scorer.

"He has the quality to help the team at this World Cup and he played well in the few minutes he was on. He needs no motivation to play for Brazil, none of the players do. He is 34 but he has the same passion

Neymar sheds tears after emotional comeback

Miami: Brazil's Neymar said he went to the dressing room and shed some tears alone following his return to the side after a gap of 981 days, coming on in the second half during Wednesday's 3-0 World Cup win over Scotland in Miami.

The 34-year-old last featured for Brazil in 2023. He suffered a serious knee injury in October that year and has struggled to maintain his form since then. He was initially a doubt for inclusion in Brazil's World Cup squad.

He then suffered a calf injury last month that ruled him out of Brazil's first two matches in the tournament. But he finally made his international comeback against Scotland, with the fans chanting his name.

"I went to the locker room, all alone, and I shed a few tears," Neymar told reporters after Brazil finished top of Group C. "It's an immense relief to relive all this. It's a moment of gratitude. I thank God for being able to experience this again."

Brazil's all-time top scorer with 79 goals, Neymar has now appeared in four World Cups, with eight goals and four assists in tournaments since 2014. "I had



Neymar celebrates with his daughter after Brazil's win over Scotland. (AFP)

been away for a long time so it's a different team now. I see it with fresh eyes," he said.

"But I'm very happy to have been able to come back and play in a World Cup and defend the Brazilian national team after so many years."

Brazil will play the runners-up in Group F in their second-round clash in Houston on Monday.

for playing football as a kid."

Brazil now go to Houston for a last-32 tie next Monday against the runners-up in Group F - either the Netherlands, Japan or Sweden. Ancelotti told Brazil fans to keep their feet on the ground. "We're now playing as a team, that was the aim," Ancelotti said. "We're not perfect, we need to improve a few things - we could be quicker when we're in possession. I'm happy because the team has improved since the opening match. Being solid is very important now that we've reached the knockout stages."

"Compared to the first game we are making fewer errors, playing with more rhythm, and we are more clinical up front," added Ancelotti.

"In the two games since Morocco we have left a good impression. The objective was to finish first, and now we just need to keep working and getting better for the next game. Now we are really playing as a team, and that was of the aim. We are not perfect, we have things to improve on. But I am very happy because we have got better already and we are solid now."

FOCUS

Clarke fears Scotland 'probably going home' after loss to Brazil

AFP
Miami

Scotland coach Steve Clarke accepted that his team may be heading home from the World Cup in a few days after completing the group stage with a comprehensive 3-0 loss to Brazil on Wednesday.

"It was a disappointing performance, a poor result. If you give a team like Brazil the chances like we gave them, you expect to get punished," Clarke said after defensive errors helped Vinicius Junior net twice in the first half and Matheus Cunha completed the scoring. "That is what happened and as for our chances at the moment, I think we are probably going home."

Scotland, who have been hoping to reach the knockout rounds at a World Cup for the first time after eight previous failed attempts, finish third in Group C with three points.

Wednesday's defeat followed a 1-0 win over Haiti in their opening game and a 1-0 loss to Morocco. They must now wait to see if their record is good enough to finish as one of the eight best third-placed teams in the 12 groups - it is likely to be a very close call. "The first thing we have to do is go away and compute that performance and why we lost the game in the manner we did. We can worry about the rest later," Clarke said.

They will return to their tournament base in Charlotte, North Carolina and wait until Saturday, when all the group-stage games are completed, to discover their fate. Scotland had been hoping to



Scotland, who have been hoping to reach the knockout rounds at a World Cup for the first time after eight previous failed attempts, finish third in Group C with three points. (AFP)

take something against Brazil but were let down by poor defending and didn't do enough to trouble Alisson in the opposition goal, except for a couple of Scott McTominay headers in the second half.

"We were playing a top-quality team, we know they are deadly in the attacking third of the pitch. We gave them the first two goals, probably the third goal as well, and they also missed a few chances and Angus (Gunn) had to make a few good saves," Clarke said.

"When you look at Brazil's attacking play in the final third and ours, there was really no comparison."

Scotland's record at major tournaments under Clarke now reads one win in nine matches, and it

may end up being a familiar tale for them. As has often been the case over the years, their travelling fans have earned most of the plaudits, while the team has struggled on the pitch.

"The fans have been absolutely brilliant, but don't forget that this group of players brought these fans to America," said Clarke.

"This group of players qualified. Otherwise we are doing what we always do - sitting on the sofa watching a World Cup without Scotland. The fans appreciate what this group of players have done. They have had a great time, been great ambassadors for the country, but they wouldn't be here without that group of players and for me that is a very important point."

OPTIMISTIC

Coach Ouahbi says Morocco have 'ingredients' of World Cup winners

AFP
Atlanta

Morocco coach Mohamed Ouahbi said his players have to believe they can become the first African winners of the World Cup after storming into the last 32 unbeaten.

The Atlas Lions twice came from behind to beat Haiti 4-2 on Wednesday and only finished second to Brazil in Group C on goal difference. A clash against the Netherlands, Japan or Sweden awaits in Monterrey on Monday.

Morocco became the first African side to even reach the semi-finals four years ago in Qatar. Ouahbi, who won the under-20 World Cup with Morocco last year, believes he can repeat that feat with the senior team.

"Morocco have entered a whole new dimension. The players, the fans believe in their team and our opponents respect our team," he said of their progress on the international stage.

"We need to believe in this objective, this target (to win the World Cup). We need to go all in, respect our opponents and be 100 percent committed to this ambition. I believe a lot in my work and the work of my staff and we have all the ingredients to become the best nation."

Ouahbi said they were disappointed to miss out on top place in their group, but that it was no surprise they had to struggle against already-eliminated Haiti.

The coach said before the match they were hoping to edge Brazil out of first place in Group C, but in the end, their 4-2 win



Morocco twice came from behind to beat Haiti 4-2 and finish second to Brazil in Group C on goal difference. A clash against the Netherlands, Japan or Sweden awaits in Monterrey on Monday. (Reuters)

over Haiti was not enough as they finished runners-up on goal difference after Brazil beat Scotland 3-0 in Miami.

"We were looking for first spot in the group, but Haiti had nothing to lose and played a good transition game, so it was not an easy game for us," Ouahbi said.

"It was a game where we put up some very good stats and had a lot of chances, and I'm very happy with all the players. We were on top of it throughout the game. But it was no surprise that Haiti would bring passion. They were always going to go all out and played with more freedom because they had already been eliminated."

The Netherlands are Morocco's most likely opponents in the next round. The Dutch lead Japan on goals scored and face already

eliminated Tunisia final Group F matches.

"I have no preferences, we will see tomorrow who we will play against," added Ouahbi. "We will play that game with the same objective and confidence."

Despite bowing out without a point, Haiti's performances at a first World Cup since 1974 have done a nation gripped by poverty proud. Les Grenadiers scored their first World Cup goals for 52 years as a Yassine Bounou own goal and Wilson Isidor's stunning strike twice gave them the lead in Atlanta.

"I am disappointed with the result, but I didn't feel that my players gave up," said Haiti coach Sebastian Migne.

"They embodied the Haitian people who do not give up."

DREAM JOB: US FOOTBALL FANS PAID \$50,000 TO WATCH EVERY WORLD CUP GAME

New York: It might just be the greatest job in the world. But for the two American men being paid \$50,000 to watch every one of the 104 games of the World Cup over 39 days, it is a labour of love.

Austin Franklin, 29, and Kevin Akoto, 26, perform their dream task in a temporary fishbowl studio with glass walls on three sides in the heart of Manhattan's Times Square. Enthusiastic fans crowd around the cube to watch the games on two 85-inch TVs as Franklin and Akoto lounge on sofas inside.

Akoto quit his job and broke up with his

partner to take up the "chief World Cup watcher" role, meant to generate excitement around the once-every-four-years event being hosted by the US, Canada and Mexico.

"The employer took it well, the individual not so well, but that's okay," Akoto said. "There's obviously some games that are duds - that's gonna happen, obviously, but you have your exciting games as well," added Akoto, who hails from Florida.

The pair are paid by Fox, one of the tournament's broadcasters, which selected them from a field of thousands

of fans who submitted video applications. The rectangular studio also has a foosball table, a small table and stools, an astro turf rug and walls adorned with the colourful scarves of national teams.

The high-profile gig has thrown up memorable moments for the pair, including a crowd of hundreds of Brazil fans crowding the plaza in front of their box. One woman threw a shoe at their enclosure. "The Brazil fans were just incredible, happy, good vibes - a good time," Franklin said. "That's just a memory I'll have with me for the rest of my life."

Akoto, who sported a Portugal cap for the side's clash against Uzbekistan on Tuesday, had built a "CR7" Cristiano Ronaldo Lego set. "Finally on the board - what a strike!" he exclaimed as the Portuguese forward scored the first of two goals in a 5-0 win.

Despite their gruelling viewing schedule, the pair insist they are not tired of spending time together. "I'm a pretty negative person," Akoto said. "It's nice to have someone positive, someone who's like a little bit different from you, who can bring that energy," said Akoto of his new

colleague. Should the hydration breaks, video reviews or half-time shows lag, the cube has been equipped with distractions including an Ultimate Football Quiz and a deck of Uno cards.

Franklin, from Massachusetts, said he was "really excited to have two games on at once," at the end of the group stage when two matches happen simultaneously.

"There is a certain energy around having a World Cup in your country," he said. "And who knows, we'll see what the United States can do here."