



FIFA World Cup
Qatar 2022

Time to get on board ahead of make-or-break battle



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EXCLUSIVE

The outcome of Iran's World Cup opener against England on Monday was obviously not what Carlos Queiroz and his men had planned for.

Having played to nip and tuck affairs with Argentina, Spain, and Portugal under the Portuguese manager in the previous two World Cups, Iranian players stepped onto the pitch at the Khalifa International Stadium on high hopes of pulling off another heroic performance against an international heavyweight of football.

But the 6-2 debacle – a worst defeat for Iran in the history of the competition – means Queiroz's men will now have to prepare for the second Group B game against Wales on Friday, knowing any result other than a victory will all but finish their quest for a place in the knockout phase.

What hurt even more than the crushing defeat was the discord among the Iranian fans on the stands, which had been sparked by the protests in Iran in recent months and fueled by the foreign media in the buildup to the game. For all the poor decisions made by Queiroz regard-



ing the starting XI and formation, one may feel for the Portuguese, who was to some extent right to put the blame on sections of the Iranian crowd for "disturbing the team with issues that are not about football." The scenes were in stark contrast with those at the

Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium later in the day, where passionate Wales's supporters went into a frenzy when Gareth Bale bagged a late equalizer from the spot. That's why a full-fledged support and positive vibe for the national team will play a decisive role in Fri-

day's game. If Queiroz wants his team win back the hearts of the Iranian people he may have to make significant changes to his lineup and gameplan, opting for a more adventurous type of football. Iran's last game in the group is against USA is on

November 29 – the anniversary of the memorable aggregate victory over Australia which secured a place at the 1998 World Cup for the country. The last thing Iranian players would want to see is to head into the contest against the Americans with nothing to fight for.



Iranian players and coaching staff are seen after the defeat against England in Group B of the 2022 World Cup at the Khalifa International Stadium, Al Rayyan, Qatar, on November 21, 2022. **● PAYAM PARSABEI/YJC**

Ronaldo to leave Man United, Glazers consider selling club



● PETER POWELL/REUTERS

BBC SPORT – Portugal forward Cristiano Ronaldo is to leave Manchester United with immediate effect. The decision follows a controversial interview in which the 37-year-old criticised the club and said he had "no respect" for manager Erik ten Hag. Both parties stated that Ronaldo's exit was "mutually agreed".

"The club thanks him for his immense contribution across two spells at Old Trafford," said a Manchester United statement.

They wished "him and his family well for the future" and added "everyone at Manchester United remains focused on continuing the team's progress under Erik ten Hag and working together to deliver success on the pitch".

United are fifth in the Premier League in Ten Hag's first season as manager, with the season taking a break for the World Cup in Qatar.

Ronaldo had just over seven months remaining on his £500,000-a-week contract with United and his departure leaves him free to sign for another club, including one in the Premier League, when the transfer window opens in January.

"Following conversations with Manchester United we have mutually agreed to end our contract early," said a statement from Ronaldo.

"I love Manchester United and I love the fans, that will never ever change. However, it feels like the right time for me to seek a new challenge.

"I wish the team every success for the remainder of the season and for the future."

Up for sale

Meanwhile, United's owners the Glazer family say they are considering selling the club as they "explore strategic alternatives".

The Americans bought the Old Trafford outfit for £790m (\$1.34bn) in 2005. It comes after years of protest from fans against their ownership.

A statement from the club said the board will "consider all strategic alternatives, including new investment into the club, a sale, or other transactions involving the company".

In 2012, the Glazers sold 10% of their holding via a stock listing and have sold further shares in the following years.

Messi laments 'five minutes of mistakes' against Saudis

Argentine captain Lionel Messi is dejected during his side's 2-1 defeat against Saudi Arabia in Group C of the World Cup at the Lusail Stadium, Lusail, Qatar, on November 22, 2022. **● MATTHIAS HANGST/GETTY IMAGES**



REUTERS – Lionel Messi lamented Argentina's shock second half capitulation against Saudi Arabia on Tuesday but said he was not surprised by the threat from opponents 48 places lower in the world rankings. "It's a situation that this group of players has never been through, it's been a while since we suffered such a tough blow, we didn't expect to start like this," Messi told Argentinian media after the 2-1 defeat in Group C.

Starting his fifth World Cup, Messi had opened the scoring with a 10th minute penalty and Argentina had three goals disallowed for offside in a free-flowing first half.

But in the second half, "in five minutes of mistakes that we made, we went 2-1 down and then it was really tough and we lost organization and started punting the ball," he said in comments broadcast by Todo Noticias. Messi said his team knew Saudi Arabia, despite being the second-lowest ranked team in the tournament, could hurt them. "We knew they were a

team who would play if we let them...They did not surprise us, we knew they could do that."

Argentina now have to focus on beating Mexico and Poland in their next group games in search of the only major title that has eluded Messi in his otherwise glittering career.

"Obviously we have to win or win now. It's up to us to fix what we did wrong and get back to the basics of who we are," said Messi, whose team had been on a 36-match unbeaten run prior to the shock result at the Lusail Stadium in Qatar.

"We're OK, obviously hurt by the result, very bitter. But people must trust that this team will not let them down and we are going to go for it in the next two games. We've played games of this nature before and we're going to perform well.

"Now's the time to be more united than ever, to show how truly strong we are."

'Stars were aligned'

EUROSPORT – Saudi Arabia boss Herve Renard said the stars aligned after his team produced a historic win

over Argentina. The Asian side recorded just their fourth-ever World Cup victory – and their second since 1994.

Renard, who previously led Zambia and the Ivory Coast to Africa Cup of Nations glory, was delighted with the victory but does not want to get carried away with Group C fixtures against Poland and Mexico still to come.

"All the stars in the sky were aligned for us, but don't forget Argentina are still a fantastic team," Renard told reporters.

"This is football, sometimes totally crazy things can happen.

"(We can) just have a good celebration during 20 minutes and that's all, there are still two more games."

He added: "Sometimes the opposition does not have the best motivation, it's normal, it also happened to us when playing lower teams.

"Some people don't understand but you can imagine that when you're playing against Saudi Arabia, the motivation is not the same as playing against Brazil."