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From Russia to Leicester and back for record-breaking Musa

Super Eagles in the hunt for a place in last 16

VOLGOGRAD: Leicester City's out-of-favour striker Ahmed Musa wrote himself into the World Cup record books by scoring twice to fire Nigeria to their first win in Russia against Iceland. The 25-year-old produced two virtuoso second-half finishes to keep the Super Eagles in the hunt for a place in the last 16 on Friday.

They would guarantee progress with victory against Argentina in Saint Petersburg on Tuesday and even a draw could take them through if other results go their way. Musa became, in the process, Nigeria's all-time highest scorer at World Cup finals with four goals and he the only man from his country to score in two different World Cups.

He is also just the second African player to register two goals in two World Cup matches since Cameroon's Roger Milla in 1990. But it has not been an easy journey for the livewire forward, who first caught the eye when, as a 21-year-old, he scored twice against Lionel Messi's Argentina in a 3-2 group stage defeat in Brazil four years ago.

Signed by the then English Premier League champions Leicester City from CSKA Moscow in 2016 for a club record £16.6 million (\$22 million), he scored his first two goals in a 4-2 friendly defeat against a Barcelona side led by Messi.

But it took him until October that year to open his Premier League account with a goal in a 3-1 win against Crystal Palace. He soon fell out of favour at the

King Power Stadium, languishing behind England's Jamie Vardy, Shinji Okazaki and Leonardo Ulloa in the pecking order.

He was encouraged by Nigeria's German coach Gernot Rohr to return to his old club in Russia on loan in January to get more game time ahead of the World Cup, a move Musa acknowledges has been vital. "They helped me get back to the style of play I had today. Were it not for CSKA, I would not have been in the World Cup."

His first goal against Iceland earned comparisons with Dennis Bergkamp's injury-time wonder goal for the Netherlands that knocked Argentina out of the 1998 World Cup quarter-finals. Twenty years later Musa has the chance to eliminate Messi's Argentina, and the pocket rocket who stands just 1.70 metres (five feet seven inches) tall is ready for

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the challenge.

"I think scoring against Argentina isn't that difficult for me," he smiled after his man-of-the-match performance in Volgograd on Friday. "I can remember four years ago when Messi played in Brazil I scored two goals," he said.

"And when I transferred to Leicester I played against Barcelona and he's on the pitch and I scored another two goals," Musa said he would like to return to CSKA permanently, but another stunning performance could see Europe's top clubs queuing up for his



Nigeria's forward Ahmed Musa (L) and Nigeria's goalkeeper Francis Uzoho (R) celebrate with a team staff member at the end of the Russia 2018 World Cup Group D football match between Nigeria and Iceland at the Volgograd Arena in Volgograd on June 22, 2018.

signature.

"I have go back to Leicester," he confirmed, but said he would only think about his future once Nigeria were eliminated, which he hopes will be at least another two

weeks away. "Coming back to CSKA, if it's possible, I would love to. It's my die-hard club. "There is nothing I can pay them for the past seasons I've been with them other than to say: 'Thank you very much'." — AFP

Favela fans celebrate Gabriel Jesus in Brazil hometown

SAO PAULO: Just four years ago, the closest Gabriel Jesus got to the World Cup was painting the streets of his favela in Sao Paulo green and yellow. On Friday, his old neighbors turned out en masse to watch him star in Russia.

Dressed in the national shirt, draped in Brazilian flags and wearing Gabriel Jesus masks, the residents of the tough Jardim Peri favela crammed into Bar da Gisele for the game against Costa Rica in Saint Petersburg.

Even if all the talk was about Neymar, his old friends and neighbors were fixated on the 21-year-old number nine. "Go Jesus, go Jesus!" the bar owner, Gisele Xavier, said, just a few doors away from where the young star grew up.

"It must so hard for him to hold his

tears back," she added, watching Jesus waiting in the tunnel before the game, which would turn out to be an unexpectedly tough test before Costa Rica's defense finally crumbled and Brazil got the 2-0 result. Xavier was wearing the favela's favorite shirt, depicting the player's face. Hers, though, had been autographed.

In her bar she also displayed two shirts from Palmeiras football club, where Jesus got his start, even if she is a passionate supporter of the rival Corinthians. "He gave them to me," she said. What Jesus also gave was a lot of pride and hope in the favela, as the poor, unregulated neighborhoods sprawling across Brazil's big cities are called.

"Imagine getting out of the neighborhood and becoming number nine on the Selecao. For us it's a huge joy," said former neighbor Ze Moa, 37, who also wore an autographed shirt. The crowd went wild in the 25th minute when Jesus appeared to have scored, only for the goal to be disallowed for offside.

"I never could have imagined this happening," said Ellon Ferreira, a friend of Jesus. "He makes us so happy. Who would ever have believed he'd get as far?" At the final whistle, Jardim Peri erupted in fireworks. Even if he hadn't



Brazil's forward Gabriel Jesus (2L) kicks the ball during the Russia 2018 World Cup Group E football match between Brazil and Costa Rica at the Saint Petersburg Stadium in Saint Petersburg on June 22, 2018.

scored and even if he was thousands of miles away, Gabriel Jesus was the life of the party. As the celebrations grew, a Brazilian funk song belted out its homespun anthem to the local hero: "Four

year ago he played football on the school pitch... Today's he's here.... Neymar passed the ball so that the boy can fly.... He passes it to the number nine, who knows that's it a goal." — AFP

position and a surprise recall to Bert van Marwijk's World Cup squad that forced him to postpone a planned honeymoon.

A day after his wedding, he jumped on a long-haul flight to the team's training camp in Turkey. Two matches into the World Cup, with Peru to come on Tuesday and Australia's tournament very much alive, Risdon's head is still spinning. "I took a moment during the national anthem to close my eyes and soak it all in during that second game (against Denmark)," the pacy full back told reporters at Australia's training base in Kazan yesterday.

"You just sort of pinch yourself and see how far you've come when you're playing against the best players on the biggest stage on the world. "It probably helps in a way that they don't know much about me."

Risdon suffered an early setback in the 2-1 loss against France, giving away a penalty with a sliding tackle on Antoine Griezmann that resulted in their first goal. He felt aggrieved by the decision but responded well, earning praise from Van Marwijk and plenty of admiration elsewhere for his hard tackling and fearless dashes out of defence. On one point in Group C after a 1-1 draw against Denmark, the Socceroos feel confident of upsetting the already eliminated Peru in Sochi. Then



Josh Risdon

it will be up to France, already in the last 16, to beat Denmark and give Australia a chance, with goal difference another factor.

Risdon hopes Ricardo Gareca-coached Peru will go for broke to push for a win, even if there is only pride on the line for them. "In terms of fast tempo, we're very fit as a side and I'm sure we can match them all day in fitness," said Risdon. "If it does open up, I think it will help us." — Reuters

World Cup heading for record number of penalties

SAMARA: One of the central themes from the early stages of the World Cup in Russia is the number of penalties being awarded, many following the intervention of video assistant referees (VARs). Gylfi Sigurdsson's missed penalty in Iceland's 2-0 loss to Nigeria on Friday was the 12th of the tournament in the first 26 matches, of which nine were scored.

In Brazil four years ago, there were only 13 penalties in the entire tournament. The World Cup record, set in 2002, stands at 18. The role of VAR goes a long way to explaining this trend, with six penalties so far being awarded following a video review.

A penalty was also disallowed in Brazil's win over Costa Rica on Friday after VAR deemed there not to have been a foul on Neymar. FIFA's director of refereeing, Massimo Busacca, said before the tournament that VAR would not be perfect at the tournament and so it has proved, with inconsistency in decision making frustrating teams and fans alike.

Both Brazil and England felt that VAR should have been used to review penalty decisions in their opening fixtures, while Australia coach Bert van Marwijk was left furious with the role the system played in his team's loss to France.

"I hoped that maybe one time there will be a referee (who is) very honest," the Dutchman, never a fan of the technology in principle, told reporters after that match. "The body language was that he didn't know from my position.

And then you have to take a decision." However, FIFA remain convinced that VAR has been a success. "Generally, it should be noted that FIFA is extremely satisfied with the level of refereeing to date and the successful implementation of the VAR system, which on the whole has been positively accepted and appreciated within our football community," said FIFA Media Relations Manager Giovanni Marti.

One of the main areas for confusion appears to be what VAR reviews can be used for. The system only comes into play for goals, penalties, red cards and mistaken identity. It cannot be used for free kicks, which has left some players frustrated.

Denmark have conceded penalties in both of their Group C games, the latest being against Australia when Yussuf Poulsen was adjudged to have hand-balled in the penalty area after VAR alerted the match referee. However, Denmark believe there was a foul on Poulsen in the build-up to the incident that should have also been considered. — Reuters

Risdon revels in World Cup after long road to Russia

KAZAN: In an Australia team that has knocked up a trove of frequent flyer points to get to Russia, defender Josh Risdon knows a thing or two about taking the long road to fulfil his dream of playing at a World Cup.

Born and raised in Bunbury, a coastal town in Western Australia, Risdon and his parents clocked up some 1,700 kilometres (1,056 miles) a week driving to and from the remote state capital Perth to play in junior representative teams. Unlike most of Australia's top talents, who ply their trade in Europe, the 25-year-old right back plays for the aptly-named Western Sydney Wanderers in Australia's A-League, a top-flight competition that involves plenty of taxing trips across the country's vast land mass.

Breaking into the Socceroos has also been a journey, with a debut in 2015, a struggle to hold down a regular