

World Cup holders France overwhelm Australia 4-1

Giroud joins Henry as France's all-time leading goalscorer

DOHA: Olivier Giroud joined Thierry Henry as France's all-time leading goalscorer with a brace as the holders roared back to beat Australia 4-1 and get their defense of the World Cup off to a flying start Tuesday. Australia took a shock lead at Al Janoub Stadium in Qatar with the game just nine minutes old when Craig Goodwin scored. France, whose build-up to the tournament was marred by injuries, saw left-back Lucas Hernandez come off hurt in the move that led to the goal. However, they recovered to equalise through Adrien Rabiot before Giroud put them ahead with an easy finish in the 32nd minute for his 50th international goal.

Kylian Mbappe got his name on the scoresheet in the second half and Giroud sealed the win to equal Henry's record tally of 51 goals for France. The win leaves them top of Group D after Denmark and Tunisia drew 0-0. "It is nice to score four goals, even if we could have had more, and it's a really good start for us," said France coach Didier Deschamps. At the age of 36, veteran AC Milan striker Giroud, who has 115 caps, is the oldest player to score for France at a World Cup. Yet he almost certainly would not have been playing here had Karim Benzema been fit.

Instead, the withdrawal of the Ballon d'Or winner with a thigh injury on the eve of the tournament has played into the hands of Giroud, who was a key player for Deschamps in France's triumphant 2018 World Cup campaign but didn't score in Russia. "He deserves respect for performing at the very highest level for so many years and delivering even when nobody seemed to believe in him," said teammate Benjamin Pavard. "I am so pleased for him because he is a great guy. I hope he keeps going and beats more records."

It is not just Benzema who is missing for Les Bleus, with Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kante—their starting midfield duo four years ago—out of the tournament. Centre-back Raphael Varane was not risked having not played since suffering a leg injury playing for Manchester United a month ago. That meant Dayot Upamecano and Ibrahim Konate—with nine caps between them—played together in central defense while Rabiot joined Aurelien



AL-WAKRAH: France's midfielder #14 Adrien Rabiot (out of frame) heads the ball to score his team's first goal as Australia's goalkeeper #01 Mathew Ryan (center) fails to stop it during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group D football match between France and Australia on November 22, 2022. —AFP

Tchouameni in midfield.

Hernandez injury blow

Australia stunned the world champions by scoring an early opener. Mathew Leckie controlled the ball on the right and escaped Lucas Hernandez before delivering a low ball across the face of goal for Goodwin to finish into the roof of the net. Hernandez hurt his right knee trying to stop Leckie, and the Bayern Munich defender was helped off to be taken for tests, with his brother Theo coming on. The younger Hernandez did not have the best introduc-

tion, giving the ball away and allowing Mitch Duke to hit a shot from range that flew just wide.

Yet he played a part in the 27th-minute equaliser—Antoine Griezmann's right-wing corner was cleared but the ball came to Hernandez on the left and his cross was headed in by Rabiot. Five minutes later Rabiot was involved again as France went ahead, hounding Nathaniel Atkinson out of possession on the French left and playing a one-two with Mbappe before teeing up Giroud. A Jackson Irvine header that hit the post in first-half stoppage time was a reminder that Australia could still threaten, but

France ran away with the game after the break.

Griezmann had a shot cleared off the line just before Mbappe made it 3-1 midway through the second half, as he headed in off a post from Ousmane Dembele's cross. Mbappe then turned provider as France got their fourth in the 71st minute, crossing for Giroud to head in a historic goal. After all the injuries, and after seeing what happened to Argentina earlier, this was a good evening for France but a sobering one for the Socceroos. "Overall the boys did all they could and that's all I can ask," said their coach Graham Arnold. —AFP

Argentina, fans cry after WCup defeat

BUENOS AIRES: Gasps gave way to stony expressions of disbelief, and then tears, as Argentina fans gathered in Buenos Aires watched the humiliation of their football team unfold at the World Cup in Qatar. "It was a walloping, a bucket of ice-cold water," Carlos Cuera, 26, said of the 2-1 loss to Saudi Arabia. He was still seated in front of a cafe television where fans decked out in their team's white-and-blue colors gathered from before 7:00 am for the breakfast match in the Argentine capital.

"Nobody expected this. We thought the first three matches would be easy victories, and now it has become more complicated," he said, adding the loss had ramped up pressure ahead of Saturday's duel with Mexico. It was one of the greatest upsets in World Cup history for Lionel Messi's Argentina side, ending a winning streak that included last year's Copa America championship. The proud, football-crazed nation entered the World Cup among the

favorites, eight years after they reached the final. But Buenos Aires quickly resumed its normal hustle and bustle as desolate fans headed to their offices.

In central Corrientes Street, not far from the city's towering Obelisk, one cafe had set up a screen on the sidewalk, prompting deliverymen, taxis, and even bus drivers to slow as they passed - hoping for another goal. Pilates instructor Lena Widgren, 50, said she had heard it would be "an easy game." But she had noticed that whenever Argentina is faced with a tie or a loss in a World Cup match, "their energy levels drop a bit, they lack fire."

The day started better than it ended. Fans leaped from their chairs, screaming with joy, when Messi scored from the penalty spot in the 10th minute. "I feel very sad, really. The game started with such euphoria, with so much desire to win, and suddenly the game turned around," said Llanca Salvi, a 26-year-old plastic artist, who added that she did not know much about football. But it was about "the emotion of being Argentine, of going out to celebrate".

Fans joined in with a cascade of insults when three first-half goals were canceled for being offside, with VAR involved. Norberto Protzmann told AFP he sat in "terror" during the second half. "We



LUSAIL: Argentina's supporter reacts at the end of the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group C football match between Argentina and Saudi Arabia on November 22, 2022. —AFP

underestimated them a little too much and they dominated us in the second half," he said. "The players were too confident, whereas the rival team put their lives into each move, because they knew they were facing a great team. And it worked well for them." —AFP

Today's matches on TV

FIFA World Cup 2022

Switzerland v Cameroon 13:00

beIN Sports HD 1 Max

Uruguay v Korea Republic 16:00

beIN Sports HD 2 Max

Portugal v Ghana 19:00

beIN Sports HD 1 Max

Brazil v Serbia 22:00

beIN Sports HD 2 Max

Brazil hoping to see the best of Neymar

DOHA: Brazil are hoping a fully fit and firing Neymar, and a well-balanced squad around him, will allow the five-time winners to live up to their status as World Cup favorites in Qatar. They begin their bid to win a record-extending sixth title on Thursday when they play a dangerous Serbia side—and the world's most expensive player is coming into the tournament in ominous form.

In 2014, Neymar's World Cup ended in agony as he suffered a fractured bone in his back in the quarter-final win over Colombia before the hosts were humiliated by Germany in the semi-finals, losing 7-1. Four years later Neymar raced to recover from injury in time for the tournament in Russia, but Brazil never hit the expected heights before losing to Belgium in the last eight. This time around, a 30-year-old Neymar arrives fresh from a fantastic start to the season with Paris Saint-Germain in which he has scored 15 goals in 20 games.

"I think Neymar is coming into this competition in great form," veteran Brazil captain Thiago Silva, now with Chelsea but a former teammate of Neymar's in Paris, told reporters on Wednesday. "His preparation this time has been different. In 2014 he got injured just as he was playing so well, and in 2018 he came into

the tournament in a different way because he had a serious injury so hadn't played much. "This time is different and he has not been injured. Neymar is a lot better prepared."

With Brazil also facing Switzerland and Cameroon in Group G, Neymar will be hoping to get the two goals he needs to equal Pele's all-time record tally of 77 goals for the Selecao. But the responsibility in attack is not all his—coach Tite can also call on a raft of other exciting attackers, including Real Madrid pair Vinicius Junior and Rodrygo. "In my opinion these players will help Neymar because they can divide up the responsibility and create space for him," added Silva, who was the captain in 2014 and is still going strong aged 38.

'Pressure is inevitable'

This tournament has already seen a heavily fancied Argentina lose in their opening match while Germany have been beaten too. But Brazil are hoping for a strong start and a repeat of what happened in the only other World Cup to be held in Asia, when they won their last title in Japan two decades ago. "The atmosphere in the squad is super healthy. The mixture of young players and more experienced ones creates a great connection," said Silva. "We have players who are accustomed to the pressure, who are used to the pressure of big games in the Champions League like Vini and Rodrygo, who are among the youngest players in the squad but have already shown they can be decisive."

Silva is one of the few survivors of the



DOHA: Brazil's forward Neymar (center) takes part in a training session at Al Arabi SC stadium in Doha on November 23, 2022, on the eve of the Qatar 2022 World Cup football match between Brazil and Serbia. —AFP

2014 team that was overwhelmed by the pressure of trying to win the World Cup on home soil. This time he is hoping to be a calming influence on the rest of the squad. "Some things change over time. I am now much better prepared for this moment, I am super calm and super determined," he said. "I am enjoying

myself at the moment and I am eager to show the best version of Thiago Silva. At the age of 38 I am enjoying one of the best spells in my career."

Coach Tite, 61, will step down at the end of the World Cup, whatever happens in Qatar. He survived in the job after the quarter-final exit in Russia in 2018 and this

time he is hoping to depart Doha as a world champion. "As Tostao said, it's good to dream, so we are dreaming of having a good World Cup and winning it," he said, citing one of the greats of Brazil's 1970 World Cup-winning side. "Only one team can be the champions. Other teams want to be too. Pressure is inevitable." —AFP