

Morocco frustrate Modric's Croatia at Qatar World Cup

'This was an extremely difficult game': Croatia captain



AL KHOR: Croatia's midfielder #15 Mario Pasalic (2nd right) attempts a shot at goal during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group F football match between Morocco and Croatia on November 23, 2022.— AFP

AL KHOR: Morocco held Croatia to a 0-0 draw in their opening game of the World Cup on Wednesday, producing a spirited display against the 2018 runners-up led by Luka Modric. Backed by Qatar's large Moroccan community at the Al Bayt Stadium, the Atlas Lions followed up north African rivals Tunisia's strong performance against dark horses Denmark a day earlier to frustrate Croatia. "This was an extremely difficult game," said Croatia captain Modric. "I do believe as the tournament goes on we'll be better and we'll adopt a more proactive attitude." Modric insisted Croatia are capable of making another deep run despite a sluggish start in the early afternoon heat.

"We've not come here to just play and get out the group," said Modric. "Our ambitions are a bit greater on the basis of our Russia achievement, but we need to take it one step at a time. "Even before the 2018 World Cup we said our primary goal was to make it out the group. If we manage to do that we can be a

dangerous opponent for any team." Coach Zlatko Dalic had urged Croatia to exercise caution following Saudi Arabia's shock win over Argentina, a result Morocco captain Romain Saiss said had "opened the door" for the tournament's less-fancied teams.

Morocco took the game to a Croatia side featuring four players who started the 2018 final but struggled to create genuine chances against a defense marshaled by the experienced Dejan Lovren. Azzedine Ounahi strangely opted against shooting when well placed inside the area, with Hakim Ziyech and Achraf Hakimi heavily involved down the right without ever truly threatening Croatia. Ivan Perisic fired just over from distance for Croatia after intercepting a dreadful pass from Selim Amallah, while goalkeeper Yassine Bounou blocked well with his legs to deny Nikola Vlasic from close range.

Modric, the former Ballon d'Or winner appearing at his fourth World Cup at the age of 37, then hammered over from the edge of the box. Morocco lost

Noussair Mazraoui early in the second half after his diving header was saved, the Bayern Munich full-back injuring himself when he tumbled awkwardly to the ground. Sofyan Amrabat poked Lovren's goal-bound effort away off the line after a scramble at a corner, while Hakimi's free-kick at the other end was beaten to safety by Croatian keeper Dominik Livakovic.

Only once have Morocco gone beyond the group stage, in 1986, but they will rate their chances of advancing with games to come against an ageing Belgium team and Group F outsiders Canada. Croatia pushed for a late winner but found Morocco's defense in unforgiving mood as Walid Regragui's side secured a valuable and deserved point. "I think it's a very good point for us," said Regragui, who was only appointed as Morocco coach in late August. "It keeps us alive for the next two games. I'm very proud of my players. I think this game makes us more confident!" — AFP

Spain humiliate Costa Rica 7-0

DOHA: Spain shredded Costa Rica 7-0 on Wednesday in a brutal destruction in their Group E opener which launched their bid to lift a second World Cup. Avoiding the fate of giants Argentina and group rivals Germany, who lost 2-1 to Japan earlier on, Luis Enrique's fancied side sparked at Doha's Al Thumama Stadium, dominating possession and taking their chances mercilessly. Ferran Torres netted twice and Marco Asensio, Dani Olmo, Gavi, Carlos Soler and Alvaro Morata were also on the scoresheet for the Euro 2020 semi-finalists in an emphatic romp.

In the past the 2010 World Cup winners have paid the price for profligacy but all three forwards Luis

Enrique selected netted in the first half to pay back his trust in them. The coach placed Asensio at false nine, flanked by Olmo and Torres, starting with Morata and Ansu Fati on the bench. The coach opted to deploy Manchester City midfielder Rodri Hernandez in central defense, alongside club teammate Aymeric Laporte, correctly anticipating his team would monopolize the ball.

It took only 11 minutes for La Roja to open the scoring, with Gavi stabbing a pass forward for Olmo to receive in the area and the RB Leipzig winger taking one sublime touch to turn and another to stroke the ball gently past Keylor Navas. Costa Rica, who were a surprise package at the 2014 World Cup, beating Italy and Uruguay and drawing with England to top their group, were sliced apart again for the second goal 10 minutes later. Jordi Alba's low drilled cross was rammed home by Real Madrid forward Asensio past his former team-mate Navas, who might have done more to keep it out.

Torres stroked home from the penalty spot after Alba was fouled by Oscar Duarte—a soft call on a hard night for Los Ticos, who were never in the game and failed to muster a shot at goal. Barcelona forward Torres capitalized on more slack defending to fire the fourth past Navas early in the second half. Luis Enrique was able to take off the effervescent Pedri and Torres before the hour mark in order to rest them for Sunday's clash with Germany, and handed teenage Barcelona left-back Alejandro Balde his debut.

The 19-year-old roared up the pitch in the build-up to Spain's fifth goal, with substitute Morata crossing for Gavi to drill home with aplomb. Kopa Trophy winner Gavi became the third youngest goalscorer at a World Cup at 18 years and 110 days old, after Mexico's Manuel Rosas and record holder Pele. Soler and Morata then got in on the act with stoppage-time strikes to pile further misery on Costa Rica and help Spain flex their muscles in a perfect opening match in Qatar. — AFP

Japan shock Germany 2-1

DOHA: Japan stunned Germany 2-1 in their World Cup opener on Wednesday, punishing the four-time champions for not taking their chances after they dominated the first half. The German team covered their mouths for the team photo before the match in a powerful protest against FIFA's decision to ban rainbow-themed armbands.

Germany came to Qatar under huge pressure to avoid the disaster of 2018, when they failed to make it out of the group stage in Russia as World Cup holders. Hansi Flick's side took the lead through a first-half penalty from Ilkay Gundogan and should have been out of sight after creating a host of chances. But Japan hung on and equalized through substitute Ritsu Doan in the 75th minute. Takuma Asano then completed a remarkable turnaround eight minutes later, smashing the ball home to send the Japanese bench and their boisterous fans wild.

To add to the storyline, both Doan and Asano play in the German Bundesliga. "The players came together as



DOHA: Japan's midfielder #08 Ritsu Doan (left) scores his team's first goal during the Qatar 2022 World Cup at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha on November 23, 2022. — AFP

one team, we prepared well and we stuck in there, and that's what led to the win," said Japan manager Hajime Moriyasu. "Lots of our fans have come to Doha and they were behind us pushing us on. I want us to keep a level head after this and look at what we could have done better and look to win the next match." Germany's World Cup future is now once again on the line, with games to come in Group E against Spain and Costa Rica.

"We made it too easy for Japan. I don't know if an easier goal has ever been scored at a World Cup," Gundogan told Germany's ARD TV network. "This must not happen to us." Thomas Mueller told Germany's Magenta TV it was "ludicrous that we are now standing here with a defeat." Japan meanwhile are eyeing a place in the knockout round after a dramatic comeback that scarcely looked possible at half-time. The Blue Samurai made a positive start, with Daizen Maeda putting the ball in the net as early as the eighth minute only for the linesman to flag for offside.

But it was to prove a false dawn for Japan as Antonio Ruediger headed past the post from a corner, before Joshua Kimmich tested goalkeeper Shuichi Gonda, with Gundogan blasting the rebound over the bar. Gundogan peppered the Japan goal with shots, with Gonda keeping him out before Maya Yoshida threw his body in the way of another effort.

Gundogan put the Germans ahead after they were awarded a penalty when Gonda tripped David Raum, coolly slotting his kick down the middle. Jamal Musiala give a glimpse of his immense talent when he turned and flashed a shot over the bar on the stroke of half-time. Kai Havertz had the ball in the net before the interval, only for VAR to rule the goal out for offside. — AFP



Fans of the Morocco national team react as they watch on a television their Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup match against Croatia at a cafe in Morocco's capital Rabat on November 23, 2022. — AFP photos



Morocco's goalkeeper #01 Yassine Bounou (left) dives for the ball as Croatia's forward #09 Andrej Kramaric looks on during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group F football match between Morocco and Croatia on November 23, 2022.



Croatia's midfielder #13 Nikola Vlasic (left) shoots but fails to score as Morocco's defender #05 Nayef Aguerd (right) defends during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group F football match between Morocco and Croatia.



A fan of Morocco cheers on the stands during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group F football match between Morocco and Croatia on November 23, 2022.



Japan's goalkeeper #12 Shuichi Gonda saves a shot during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group E football match between Germany and Japan on November 23, 2022.



Spain's forward #11 Ferran Torres (front right) scores his team's fourth goal during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group E football match between Spain and Costa Rica on November 23, 2022.