

## Japan clinch World Baseball Classic

Ohtani shines as Samurai down USA in fairytale win



MIAMI: Team Japan celebrates after defeating Team USA in the World Baseball Classic Championship at loanDepot Park on March 21, 2023. — AFP

MIAMI: Shohei Ohtani delivered a fairytale 3-2 victory for Japan over the United States on Tuesday as the Asian powerhouses won the World Baseball Classic for a record third time. Home runs from Munetaka Murakami and Kazuma Okamoto helped put Japan ahead before Los Angeles Angels superstar Ohtani closed out the win from the mound in the ninth inning.

In a perfectly scripted finale at Miami's loanDepot Park, Ohtani struck out Angels teammate and US captain Mike Trout to clinch Japan's third WBC victory following triumphs in 2006 and 2009. Two-way threat Ohtani, the 2021 American League Most Valuable Player who has earned comparisons to Babe Ruth since arriving in Major League Baseball, said the win was the highlight of his career. "It's definitely number one," Ohtani told FOX television through a translator. "It's got to be up there. It was a storybook ending."

"More than anything, I appreciate this tournament, this whole situation, this whole atmosphere," added

Ohtani, who was named tournament MVP. Ohtani had fired up Japan with a rousing pre-game speech in which he urged his teammates to "stop admiring" an American lineup regarded as the strongest US baseball team ever assembled. "Obviously, the US lineup, one through nine, they're all household names, superstars," Ohtani said afterward.

"All the Japanese guys know them. So I didn't want us to be passive. Show respect — but stay aggressive, stay confident. That's why I gave that speech." The star-studded US team, defending champions after winning the last edition of the tournament in 2017, were left ruing their inability to get on top of Japan's pitchers. Philadelphia Phillies shortstop Trea Turner blasted the hosts to a 1-0 lead in the top of



the second inning with a solo shot to left field. But Japan hit back immediately with Murakami — the hero of Japan's walk-off win over Mexico in Monday's semifinal — launching a home run to right-center field in the bottom of the second off US starter Merrill Kelly. Kelly's problems were only just beginning, with the Arizona right-hander giving up singles to Okamoto and Sosuke Genda before walking Yuhei Nakamura to load the bases.

That prompted US skipper Mark DeRosa to pull Kelly, with Aaron Loup brought in to get out of the jam. Loup managed to emerge from the situation relatively unscathed, with Japan picking up just one more run for a 2-1 lead after Lars Nootbaar grounded out to score Okamoto. Japan extended their lead in the bottom of the fourth when Okamoto crushed a fly ball to left field off US reliever Kyle Freeland to make it 3-1. The Americans threatened to haul themselves back into contention in the fifth but left Mookie Betts and Nolan Arenado stranded on base. It was a similar story in the top

of the seventh when Jeff McNeil took a leadoff walk before Betts singled to leave US runners on first and second with no outs.

Once again though, the US were unable to cash in, with Trout lining out to right fielder Kensuke Kondoh before a double-play ended the inning. Japan manager Hideki Kuriyama turned to Yu Darvish to lock it down in the eighth. But after getting rid of Arenado, the San Diego Padres pitcher was jolted by a monster home run from Kyle Schwarber, who launched a fly ball into the upper tiers to make it a one-run game.

Devin Williams went scoreless through the eighth inning, setting up a dream final inning, with Ohtani pitching to close out the game. Ohtani started nervously by walking McNeil, but Betts grounded into a double play to leave Japan just one out from victory. That left Ohtani needing to dispose of Trout to clinch the victory, and the US captain struck out swinging to end the game. — AFP

## World Cup winner Mesut Ozil retires

ISTANBUL: World Cup winner Mesut Ozil announced his retirement from football on Wednesday after an illustrious international career with Germany and club spells with Real Madrid and Arsenal. The 34-year-old helped Germany to glory in Brazil in 2014 but bitterly quit the international scene after the Germans crashed out of the 2018 tournament in Russia.

"After thoughtful consideration, I'm announcing my immediate retirement from professional football," the attacking midfielder said. "I've had the privilege to be an international footballer for almost 17 years now and I feel incredibly thankful for the opportunity. But in recent weeks and months, having also suffered some injuries, it's become more and more clear that it's time to leave the big stage of football."

Ozil, born in the German city of Gelsenkirchen but of Turkish descent, played on some of football's biggest stages but also became embroiled in international politics and accusations of racism. When Germany were knocked out of the 2018 World Cup at the group stage, a wounded Ozil accused the German public of "racist" attacks.

His club career blossomed when his deft passing and vision helped secure his move from the Bundesliga to Jose Mourinho's Real Madrid



Mesut Ozil

side in 2010. He soon led La Liga in assists while helping the Spanish club to their 32nd league title in 2012. His big-money move to Arsenal in 2013 helped the London club end their FA Cup drought the following year.

In 2014, Ozil started the final as Germany beat Lionel Messi's Argentina 1-0 in the Maracana in Rio de Janeiro thanks to Mario Goetze's extra-time goal. Ozil was repeatedly shortlisted for the Ballon d'Or but the later stages of his career were troubled by disputes over playing time and his close personal friendship with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Erdogan was the best man at Ozil's Istanbul wedding to

former Miss Turkey and actress Amine in 2019. But it was Ozil's decision to be pictured with Erdogan on the eve of Turkey's 2018 presidential election that caused particular controversy during that summer's World Cup. Ozil's picture with the Turkish leader was widely interpreted as his political endorsement of Erdogan in the 2018 election campaign. He ended his international career before moving to Fenerbahce and most recently Istanbul Basaksehir. — AFP

## Messi 'madness' in Argentina as champs play first match

BUENOS AIRES: Lionel Messi and his Argentina teammates will make a triumphant return in their homeland on Thursday when they play their first match since winning the World Cup in Qatar. More than 1.5 million fans applied for 63,000 available tickets for the match against Central American minnows Panama at the Monumental stadium in Buenos Aires.

Football-mad Argentines were out in even larger numbers following the Albiceleste's dramatic penalty shoot-out victory over France in December. An estimated five million people thronged the streets of Buenos Aires a few days later for the trophy parade. Such was the multitude that the parade had to be abandoned long before it reached central Buenos Aires as it was already hours behind schedule.

Messi had been widely expected to retire from international football after the final in Doha, in which he scored two goals and a shoot-out spot-kick, but the Paris Saint-Germain forward said he wanted to carry on a bit longer so he could wear the blue and white Argentina jersey as a world champion. "He is in good shape, he wants to keep coming. When he tells me that he doesn't feel good, we'll see," coach Lionel Scaloni said on Tuesday. "At the moment he is happy with the national team."

The expectation was slightly soured earlier this month when two men fired shots at a closed supermarket belonging to the family of Messi's wife, before leaving a menacing message aimed at the seven-time Ballon d'Or winner. "Messi, we're waiting for you. Javkin is a narco, he won't take care of you," said the handwritten message left on the ground, in reference to Pablo Javkin, the mayor of Messi's hometown Rosario, around 320 km north of Buenos Aires.

Messi, though, has taken it all in his stride, as his father pointed out. "I spoke to the kid and he told me: 'relax'," Jorge Messi told reporters. For the mayor of Rosario, it was more of a publicity stunt than a genuine threat. "What story goes more quickly viral in the world than an attack on Messi?" said Javkin. While it may not directly affect Messi, the incident



EZEIZA, Argentina: Argentina's forward Lionel Messi smiles during a training session on March 21, 2023, ahead of the friendly football matches against Panama and Curacao. — AFP

did highlight a growing problem in the 35-year-old's hometown. Rosario is a port city on the Parana river that has gradually become a nerve center for drug trafficking and the most violent city in Argentina, with 287 murders in 2022.

### 'Everyone will want to beat us'

A party atmosphere is expected in Buenos Aires for the team's competitive homecoming. With 20,000 places in the 83,000-capacity stadium reserved for invitees, the remaining tickets were snapped up within two hours of going on sale. The cheapest cost 12,000 pesos (\$60) up to 49,000 pesos (\$245), which is more than half the average monthly salary in the South American country.

Argentine football federation president Claudio Tapia said the body had received more than 130,000 requests for media accreditation, in a stadium that has capacity for just 344 journalists. "We would love to be able to accommodate everyone, but we would need two ... stadiums, just for journalists. The madness for Argentina is total," said Tapia.

Those not lucky enough to get inside the stadium will at least be able to watch the match for free on television after the government decided to broadcast it freely. Scaloni promised them is that the team would not rest on their laurels, regardless of the occasion or opponents. "The aim is to keep playing at the same level," he said. "Now, it will be harder than ever because everyone will want to beat us." After Thursday's match, Argentina will play the island of Curacao on Match 28 in Santiago del Estero. — AFP