

## Football God 481

Chapter 481: FIFA World Cup 2026 [12]

Ukraine vs Tunisia was the final game of Group I but it was not the final game of June 17th.

There was another game, the final game of the day.

A Group J clash between Portugal and Senegal.

(GROUP J:)

(Portugal vs Senegal)

(Venue: AT&T Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 17, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

It was another FIFA World Cup blockbuster encounter, an encounter between 2 big footballing nations; Portugal who were European football giants, and Senegal who were African footballing giants.

It was a clash of culture just as much as it was a football clash.

Both countries entered the stage with their best. Portugal lined up in a classic 4-3-3 formation with Diogo Costa in between the posts, with a protective backline of Diogo Dalot in right back, Ruben Dias and Inacio in center back, and the electric PSG fullback, Nuno Mendes in left back.

The midfield trio comprised PSG's Vitinha through the middle, Manchester United's Bruno Fernandes to his right, and Manchester City's Bernardo Silva to his left.

The attacking trio comprised of Joao Felix in right wing, Rafael Leao in left wing, and Diogo Jota through the middle as the striker.

Portugal's starting XI was a blockbuster one, but their bench had even more firepower and esteemed star power in Cristiano Ronaldo, Goncalo Ramos, Francisco Trincao, Conceicao and others.

As for Senegal? It was a classic Senegal starting XI, a strong one but in contrast to the Portugal lineup, it paled slightly in star power.

Senegal started in a 4-3-3 formation with Eduoard Mendy in between the posts, with a protective backline of Diatta, Kalidou Koulibaly, Niakhate, and Camara standing in front of the goalkeeper.

The midfield trio comprised Sarr, Idrissa Gueye, and Camara, while the attacking trio comprised Diao, Sadio Mane, and Diallo leading the line as the striker.

The AT & T Stadium in USA was filled to the brim, tens of thousands of fans huddling together to watch the Portuguese G.O.A.T who started on the bench, millions more watching online.

And then, it started.

FWEEE!

Senegal started the game positively but after the 20th minute as the game wore on, a noticeable change took place on the pitch.

The expected Portugal dominance started.

Portugal's backline was as impenetrable as a rock, and it paved the way for their talented midfield and forward line to flourish.

From the 20th minute of the game, the Portugal dominance started and 11 minutes later in the 31st minute, they got their first goal of the game.

Vitinha lashed into a ball that Diogo Dalot laid for him before unleashing an outside the box piledriver that drove through the pitch low before tearing its way into the bottom right corner of the net, leaving Mendy very little chance.

1-0 to Portugal in the 31st minute.

After that goal, Senegal reacted with urgency to get the equalizer goal but it didn't materialize fast enough before they were punished again.

This time, Rafeal Leao, the mercurial AC Milan winger took the ball from deep before wriggling his way into the Senegal box with electric skill before he was tripped by an overzealous Koulibaly.

FWEEEE!

The referee blew his whistle and immediately pointed to the spot.

Portugal got a penalty kick.

Bruno Fernandes stepped up to take the penalty kick and he didn't miss a beat, sending the goalkeeper one way before placing it into the right corner of the net with an immaculate kick.

Fernandes celebrated his goal animatedly with passion, roaring at the fans.

Portugal fans were on top of the world.

2-0 to Portugal in the 39th minute of the game.

The first half came to an end 2-0.

When second half started, just like the first half, Senegal started with energy as Ismaila Sarr was finally introduced into the game, replacing Diallo, the striker.

For a period of time, Senegal was the more dangerous team but they couldn't get their goal. And then, Portugal fans started clamoring for a change.

"Ronaldo!" "Ronaldo!" "Ronaldo!"

They chanted.

They were calling for the coach to introduce CR7, Cristiano Ronaldo to the pitch and in the 65th minute, the coach finally relented, taking off Diogo Jota and introducing Cristiano Ronaldo to the game.

The reaction was crazy, the noise in the stadium rising to a crescendo.

And then, Cristiano Ronaldo showed exactly what he was made of.

At the ripe old age of 41, he already lost his speed and most of his physicality but his positioning was still elite, and he could still shoot a ball.

In the 76th minute of the game, Rafael Leao went on another of those trademark mazy runs, penetrating the Senegal backline with criminal ease and just as he was to be dispossessed, he kicked the ball into space.

For a moment, chaos in the box, then...

BAM!

Cristiano Ronaldo struck.

The ageless striker was in the right spot at the right time to strike, tapping into the net as the goalkeeper could not react.

It was a classic poacher's goal. It was classic CR7.

The stadium erupted as Ronaldo charged towards the corner flag where he jumped up before doing his iconic celebration. Tens of thousands of fans in the stadium did the celebration with him.

"SUUUUU!" They roared.

In the 76th minute of the game, Portugal led 3-0.

It was not over yet though. Even this late in the game, and trailing by 3 goals, Portugal refused to give up as Ismaila Sarr kept on infusing energy into the attack with his rampaging runs.

His effort eventually paid off in the 88th minute of the game when Sadio Mane raised the ball over the Portugal defense for him to run into.

Diogo Costa charged out, rapidly closing the forward down but keeping his goal, Ismaila Sarr kicked the ball long to the side, evading the goalkeeper before eventually kicking it into an empty net.

"GOALLLLLLL...!"

Senegal fans roared in celebration.

At this stage of the game, it was just a consolation goal but they didn't complain. They accepted it magnanimously.

The game eventually came to an end.

Rafael Leao won the man of the match award.

Chapter 482: FIFA World Cup 2026 [13]

The next day, matchday 1 of the FIFA World Cup continued.

Football fans already saw more than enough action and clutch moments in the tournament since matchday 1 started, but they were not tired.

They watched every subsequent game with just the same excitement and anticipation. The FIFA World Cup was just that, a tournament unlike any other.

No true fan of the sport wanted to miss any of the thrillers.

And this time, the first game of the day was between Czech Republic and Iraq and it took place in at the Mercedes Benz stadium in USA.

(GROUP J:)

(Czech Republic vs Iraq)

(Venue: Mercedes-Benz, USA)

(Date: June 18, 2026)

(Time: 14:00)

18th June, 2026...

The 2 countries took to the pitch in another FIFA World Cup encounter. They played their hearts out on the pitch, doing everything they could to win.

2 goals were scored, 1 each by both countries and yet both goals were ruled out for offside. Both countries game their all to win, but it was not enough.

The game ended in a goalless draw.



...

And then, Uruguay vs DR Congo.

(GROUP K:)

(Uruguay vs DR Congo)

(Venue: Estadio Azteca, Mexico)

(Date: June 18, 2026)

(Time: 16:00)

It was a game of Lion vs Mouse.

On one side, Uruguay, you had a national team fielding the likes of Barcelona's Ronald Araujo, Jose Gimenez, Bentancur in midfield, captained by the Real Madrid midfield mainstay, Federico Valverde.

Uruguay even had the likes of Pellistri and Darwin Nunez in attack.

As for DR Congo? They fielded the likes of Bakambu, Kayembe, Moutoussamy, and Batubinsika. Wissa was perhaps the only big name in the national team, but it was not enough against a country like Uruguay.

The South Americans ran riot against their Nigerian opponents.

Uruguay opened the scoring in the 17th minute, Ronald Araujo leaping highest to lash to a corner kick, scoring the first goal of the game to make it 1-0.

Just 3 minutes later, Bentancur played a defense splitting through pass that set Darwin Nunez on a straight course towards goal.

Nunez was one on one with the goalkeeper, all he had to do was shoot the ball to score and yet he didn't shoot. Overcomplicating matters, he was indecisive and tried to dribble but the goalkeeper outsmarted him, snatching the ball before he could wriggle out of his range.

Nunez cursed in frustration.

But just 8 minutes later, in the 28th minute of the game, he got his chance to redeem himself as he received another through pass from the same Bentancur.

This time, Nunez didn't overthink it, learning from his earlier experience as he took one touch of the ball before rifling it into the roof of the net with a wicked left-footed effort.

The goalkeeper didn't see it coming, it was only when his net shook that he realized what happened.

Darwin Nunez celebrated his goal emotionally, even breaking down in tears at some point but then, the game continued.

It was all Uruguay at this point.

In the 37th minute, the Uruguayan captain, Federico Valverde burst to life, receiving the ball just outside the 18-yard box.

As soon as he received the ball, more than half of the fans in the stadium stood up, some screaming for the DR Congo defenders to close him down, while others screamed for him to take the shot.

Valverde took the shot.

POW!

The ball rose like a missile, flying with deadly speed and uncanny precision before tearing its way into the top left bin of the net.

What a goal!

The commentators went crazy, waxing lyrical as Federico Valverde whirled away in celebration, his teammates swarming him to celebrate with him.

The first half rout was not over though as Pellistri also got his name on the scoresheet in the 45th minute, scoring after a well-worked Uruguayan sequence of play, making it 4-0.

The first half came to an end 4-0 in Uruguay's favor.

The second half was more bland, but Uruguay still wrapped things up with a late 5th goal, Nunez wrestling the DR Congo defenders to win back the ball before poking it past the onrushing goalkeeper and into the net.

The game came to an end 5-0.

It was a dominant Uruguay performance. Federico Valverde won the man of the match award after an all-action performance on both sides of the pitch.

...

2 hours later on the same day, Switzerland took on Costa Rica.

(GROUP K:)

(Switzerland vs Costa Rica)

(Venue: Estadio Monterrey, Mexico)

(Date: June 18, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

It was the final Group K encounter of matchday 1.

Switzerland started in a 4-2-3-1 formation with Mvogo in between the posts, with a defensive quadruple of Muheim, Rodriguez, Cumart, and Fernandes protecting the goalkeeper.

The midfield duo comprised the stalwart Granit Xhaka and Freuler.

Ugrinic started in right wing, Sohm in attacking midfield, while Kutesa started in left wing. Amdouni played as the team's striker.

As for Costa Rica, they played in defensive 5-3-2 formation with Taylor, Mitchell, Gamboa, Calvo, and Mora forming the defensive line that protected Sequeirra, their goalkeeper.

The midfield trio comprised Vargas, Bran, and Alcorer, while further ahead in attack were the 2 strikers, Ugalde and Martinez.

It was a tight game between 2 teams with a lot of fiery zeal to win.

It was end to end, Switzerland dominating possession and creating more chances while Costa Rica launched dangerous counterattacks once they got the ball.

To supporters of both nations, it was nerve-racking but to neutral fans, it was an unforgettable thriller.

The first half was intense but it ended in a goalless draw.

The second half showcased even more intense and fast-paced football. Eventually, Switzerland broke the deadlock, Granit Xhaka bursting to life to score the first goal of the game in the 77th minute.

Switzerland thought it was the winning goal.

Well, they were right because 4 minutes later, Granit Xhaka made it a double, scoring another goal in the 81st minute to send Costa Rica off with 0 points.

Switzerland snatched all 3 points from the game.

Granit Xhaka won the man of the match award.

Chapter 483: FIFA World Cup 2026 [14]

Switzerland vs Costa Rica was the final Group K encounter of matchday 1, and it was also the final game of June 18th.

The next day, the FIFA World Cup continued.

June 19, 2026...

The new day games started with an epic Group L encounter between Belgium and Paraguay, 2 big representatives of European and South American football.

(GROUP L:)

(Belgium vs Paraguay)

(Venue: MetLife Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 19, 2026)

(Time: 16:00)

The atmosphere in the buildup to the game was filled with venom, both coaches attacking each other's playstyle and their opposition weaknesses publicly on social media.

All that and more promised football fans that the game was going to be a thriller, and finally, D-day was here.

For Paraguay, they started in a 4-2-3-1 formation with Fernandez in between the posts and a defensive quadruple of Alonso, Alderete, Balbuena, and Caceres sitting in front of the goalkeeper to protect him.

In midfield was the duo of Gomez and Cubas, while further ahead in attack was Galarza in left wing, Enciso in attacking midfield, and Miguel Almiron as the right winger of the team. Avalos led the team as the striker.

It was a formidable Paraguay lineup, but they went up against an equally formidable Belgium team if not an even more formidable one.

Belgium started in a 4-3-3 formation with Thibaut Courtois in between the posts as the goalkeeper, and his defensive protectors being Meunier, Faes, Debast, and Castagne. The midfield trio was led by a Belgian legend, the maestro Kevin De Bruyne who led Raskin and Vanaken in the midfield.

Further ahead in attack were 3 familiar faces, Leondro Trossard in right wing, Jeremy Doku in left wing, and Romelu Lukaku who seemed to never age in attack as the sole striker of the team.

FWEEE!

The referee's whistle sounded and all hell broke loose.

It was an epic game between 2 countries with distinct footballing styles. It was a game of European technicality versus South America's tenacity and team spirit, traits that Paraguay fully embodied.

During the first 20 minutes of the game, Belgium dominated, hoarding possession as with Kevin De Bruyne being the danger man as usual, they caused the most threat with his penetrative passes.



Romelu Lukaku was perhaps the only reason why Belgium didn't get their name on the scoresheet during the first 20 minutes.

In a way, it was vintage Lukaku as he burst into space with his speed and physicality, receiving killer passes from Kevin De Bruyne only to botch it by either shooting off target or straight into the arms of the goalkeeper.

"F\*ck!" He kept cursing, grabbing his head in disbelief.

On the left and right sides of the pitch, Belgium's wingers also worked their asses off as they torched their markers with electric dribbles.

Jeremy Doku especially was a menace, dribbling past Paraguay's right back at some point before unleashing a curled shot that hit the post, sending an eruption of gasps across the stadium in the 18th minute.

And yet, Belgium didn't have the energy to do this all game, to dominate a game of football like this for 90 minutes.

After 20 minutes, the Belgian energy reduced.

And with it, Paraguay surged to life.

The Paraguayan players came out of their shell, running everywhere, as Miguel Almiron and Jose Enciso led the sudden Paraguayan offensive charge.

Belgium didn't just roll over for their opponents though, they made it hard, stifling the game to turn it into an exciting one of end to end football.

Belgium still dominated, but Paraguay was no longer idle.

They threatened.

The game progressed past the 40th minute, still a goalless draw and just like it seemed like it would end like that, a defensive lapse did one of the countries in, allowing their striker to take advantage.

It was Belgium. They were not the one who scored, rather, they were the ones with the defensive mistake.

Thibaut Courtois made a mistake that was uncharacteristic of him, passing the ball to his right back but he didn't add enough force to the kick, allowing Galazar to pounce on the ball.

The winger was immediately closed down even as Courtois reacted to rectify his mistake but Galazar didn't even think to shoot with an open net before him. Rather, as they rushed towards him, including the goalkeeper, he passed.

Bam!

The ball rolled to his right, setting it up for Avalos, the striker.

It was too hard to miss, and Avalos didn't miss.

He simply pushed the ball, changing its direction into the net with the gentlest of touches.

It happened in the 44th minute and the MetLife Stadium exploded.

BOOM!

South American fans roared, celebrating at the top of their lungs.

The first half came to an end 0-1 to Paraguay.

And yet, it was in the second half when a Kevin De Bruyne who was already on the wrong side of 30 decided to roll back the years with a vintage performance.

BAM!

The second half barely started when the Belgian maestro took matters into his own hands, striking the ball from outside the box in the 56th minute to score when Belgium needed it the most.

Paraguay was stunned.

MetLife melted from the roars and chants of Belgian fans.

"Kevin... De... Bruyne!" They sang.

Just 4 minutes after the goal to drag the game level, Kevin De Bruyne crossed the ball into the box from the right side of the pitch, setting it up perfectly for Romelu Lukaku to pounce on, poking into the net.

BOOM!

MetLife stadium melted a second time from the roars of Belgian fans as their country finally took the lead in the game.

But it was not enough. Not yet, said De Bruyne.

In the 86th minute, when most of the Paraguayan players pushed upward in search of the equalizing goal, Belgium won back possession and the ball eventually found its way to De Bruyne's feet.

He kicked it, sending a penetrative through pass that cut Paraguay's defense open like a hot knife through butter, sending Lukaku on his way to heaven.

Lukaku chased the ball, arrived before the goalkeeper, raised the ball above the goalkeeper, chased after it, before rifling a shot into the now empty net.

"GOALLLLLLL....!!!" The stadium exploded.

Lukaku celebrated excitedly, pointing towards Kevin De Bruyne who was the game changer on the afternoon.

Belgium won the game 3-1.

Kevin De Bruyne won the man of the match award.

Chapter 484: FIFA World Cup 2026 [15]

(GROUP L:)

(Ecuador vs Sweden)

(Venue: BC Place, Canada)

(Date: June 19, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

Ecuador vs Sweden, the final game of the 2026 FIFA World Cup's group stage matchday 1 encounter.

In the buildup to the game, fans joked that Sweden should bring Zlatan Ibrahimovic back to represent their country but of course, it didn't happen.

That didn't stop Zlatan Ibrahimovic memes from flooding the internet though. And somehow, the Sweden national team coach used that to his advantage in the psychological warfare involved in the buildup to the game.

According to the Sweden national team coach, the fact that Zlatan Ibrahimovic would be available in Canada to watch the game live was a direct guarantee that they would win the game.

Such superstition was bullshit, but well, who cares?

The fans loved the banter.

In response, Ecuador's coach called the Sweden coach toxic, tainting the unity of football but few people cared. Some supported him, but most were content to watch the drama in the buildup to the game.

And finally, D-day came. The moment of truth.

For Ecuador, they started in a 3-4-3 formation, with Galindez in between the posts and the 3-man defense ahead of him comprising Ordonez at the right, Hincapie by the left, and PSG's Pacho in the middle.

Most people never knew Pacho's nationality till today. For PSG, the man was a menace, forming an unbreakable defensive partnership with Marquinhos in recent years.

Now, it was time to represent his country.

It was time to bring his club form to represent his national team.

Ahead of the defense in midfield stood the quadruple of Franco, Moses Caicedo, Vite, and Estupinian. And in attack was the trio of Plata, Guagua Silva, and the Ecuadorian national team record highest goal scorer, the ageless Valencia.

In contrast to the Ecuadorian national football team lineup, Sweden lined up in a 3-4-1-2 formation with Johansson in between the posts, and a defensive partnership of Starfelt, Gudmundsson, and Sema protecting him.

Further ahead in midfield was a quadruple lineup of Ayari, Karlstrom, Saletros, and Nanasi, and then Kulusevski as the sole attacking midfielder who stood ahead of them.

And then the 2 star-man upfront, 2 names that could cause trepidations to flow through any country's defense in Victor Gyokeres and Aleksander Isak.

Maybe some countries would have fielded one and benched the other. After all, fielding 2 strikers was risky.

But not Sweden.

Not the Sweden national team coach.

The enigmatic coach fielded his 2 strikers, and he was confident in them wreaking havoc against this Ecuadorian side.

And like he said, with Zlatan Ibrahimovic, the biggest Sweden legend watching the game from the stands, the boys would perform.

And that was exactly what they did on the pitch, they performed.

FWEEE!

As soon as the game started, Ecuador started with the normal high South American energy, Caicedo leading the charge to run their opponents to the ground but Sweden did not bulge nor did they panic as they calmly did their thing.

Ecuador dominated the midfield battle for large swathes of the first half, Moses Caicedo and Estupinian doing their thing from the middle of the park, but none of it faced Sweden who weathered the offensive calmly.

And then in the 32nd minute of the game, Sweden struck.

1 chance, 1 goal.



It was a counterattacking chance.

Gudmundsson won back the ball, could not recover fast enough from his sliding tackle. But luckily, he had a partner in crime, Sema quickly kicking the ball to Karlstrom who took one look, noticed Aleksander Isak's run before hitting the ball long into his path.

But Isak didn't take the ball into his strides, rather, he kicked it once with the heel of his boot, sending it into Gyokeres' path.

One of the Ecuador defenders tried to hold Gyokeres but the towering striker simply shoved him aside before running with the ball.

And just after he entered the 18 yard box, he swung his leg, then...

BAM!

It was a shot straight out of the top drawer, the ball flying with devastating speed and power before tearing its way into the roof of the net.

Ecuador didn't stand and watch after they conceded. Rather, they kept on playing their game and finally, they got rewarded for their efforts, Valencia getting on the end of a well-worked team effort to score and make it 1-1 in the 39th minute of the game.

The first half drama was not over though.

In the 43rd minute, the masked man struck again.

Victor Gyokeres ghosted into space as soon as a corner kick was played. The ball didn't get to him, but it got to a Ecuador defender who botched his headed clearance, sending the ball into Gyokeres' position instead.

The striker did not hesitate, jumping acrobatically before swinging his leg in a scissors kick, sending the ball past the goalkeeper and into the net.

1-2.

The stadium erupted as soon as the ball went in, the commentators going crazy as they waxed lyrical about the goal.

The first half came to an end 1-2.

And then, in the second half, Sweden ran away with the victory.

Zlatan Ibrahimovic's presence truly felt like voodoo as the 2 Swedish strikers performed at extraterrestrial levels on the night.

Gyokeres scored the first 2 goals to give Sweden the lead in the first half, while Isak scored the final 2 to end the game in the second half.

The first came from a trademark Isak run in the 61st minute, taking the ball into his strides, dribbling past 2 players before rifling it into the roof of the net.

The second came in the 73rd minute, Gyokeres repaying the favor as he assisted Isak for the first goal which he assisted, leaving the ball for Isak who didn't hesitate, lunging at it and shooting at the top right corner.

The Ecuador goalkeeper got a hand to it but it was not enough as the ball tore its way into the net.

1-4 to Sweden.

The game ended and Victor Gyokeres got the man of the match award.

Chapter 485: FIFA World Cup 2026 [16]

With Sweden's 1-4 victory over Ecuador, matchday 1 of the 2026 FIFA World Cup finally came to an end.

It was a matchday that had everything; from crushing victories, to upsets, and then to blockbuster end to end encounters, it had it all.

Football fans saw enough action to forge memories for a long time, but it was not over yet. If anything, matchday 1 was just the beginning of the FIFA World Cup. After matchday 1, the group tables updated.

[FIFA World Cup 2026:]

[Group A:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[Ghana: 1/0/0/3]

[Japan: 0/1/0/1]

[Poland: 0/1/0/1]

[Mexico: 0/0/1/0]

...

[Group B:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[France: 1/0/0/3]

[South Korea: 1/0/0/3]

[Peru: 0/0/1/0]

[Morocco: 0/0/1/0]

...

[Group C:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[Brazil: 1/0/0/3]

[Egypt: 1/0/0/3]

[Serbia: 0/0/1/0]

[Australia: 0/0/1/0]

...

[Group D:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[Argentina: 1/0/0/3]

[Chile: 1/0/0/3]

[Norway: 0/0/1/0]

[Qatar: 0/0/1/0]

...

[Group E:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[Nigeria: 1/0/0/3]

[Canada: 1/0/0/3]

[Saudi Arabia: 0/0/1/0]

[Croatia: 0/0/1/0]

...

[Group F:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[Spain: 1/0/0/3]

[Italy: 1/0/0/3]

[New Zealand: 0/0/1/0]

[Iran: 0/0/1/0]

...

[Group G:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[Germany: 1/0/0/3]

[Honduras: 1/0/0/3]

[Colombia: 0/0/1/0]

[Iraq: 0/0/1/0]

...

[Group H:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[England: 1/0/0/3]

[USA: 0/1/0/1]

[Slovenia: 0/1/0/1]



[Algeria: 0/0/1/0]

...

[Group I:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[Netherlands: 1/0/0/3]

[Ukraine: 0/1/0/1]

[Tunisia: 0/1/0/1]

[China: 0/0/1/0]

...

[Group J:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[Portugal: 1/0/0/3]

[Czech Republic: 0/1/0/1]

[Iraq: 0/1/0/1]

[Senegal: 0/0/1/0]

...

[Group K:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[Uruguay: 1/0/0/3]

[Switzerland: 1/0/0/3]

[Costa Rica: 0/0/1/0]

[DR Congo: 0/0/1/0]

...

[Group L:]

[Team: W/D/L/PTS]

[Belgium: 1/0/0/3]

[Sweden: 1/0/0/3]

[Ecuador: 0/0/1/0]

[Paraguay: 0/0/1/0]

10 groups, 24 games, 48 countries, and this was the outcome.

It was expansive, but it was exciting. This was the allure and excitement of the FIFA World Cup, it was a tournament beyond just football.

It was a tournament that united the world, bringing countries from all the continents of the world to compete against each other.

Losing matchday 1 of the FIFA World Cup was not the end of the world, it did not translate to automatic disqualification from the knockout stage, but still, to avoid late pressure and to have their fate in their own hands, winning matchday 1 was a necessity for the biggest footballing countries.

So far, most favorites of the FIFA World Cup 2026 were already on track.

In Group B, France was already leading the pile with 3 points. Morocco had a long journey ahead of them if they were to replicate their FIFA World Cup 2022 heroics again.

In Group C, Brazil, another favorite was on track with a dominant first group stage win. In Group D, Argentina was also on track, but they were in a tricky group with the likes of Chile and Norway. The odds were in their favor to progress though.

Group E was where the true shocker was happening. Nigeria was never a true footballing heavyweight when it came to the FIFA World Cup.

They've never made it to the quarter final of the FIFA World Cup, they didn't even play in the last World Cup as they could not qualify.

Yes, they had the highest rated striker in the world currently in their squad, but it was well known in world football that rarely do one player become capable enough to singlehandedly change the fortunes of a country in football.

This was why Croatia were branded as the favorites to progress from Group E, and yet, the table presented an entirely different storyline.

Nigeria and Canada were the ones leading the race with 3 points apiece. Croatia now had a steep battle ahead of them if they were to qualify to the knockout stage of the FIFA World Cup.

In Group F, Spain were on point. As for Italy, they were rated as heavyweights of football mostly due to past glory and history in recent years.

But still, having won the Euros 2021, nobody wrote them off yet.

In Group G, Germany was on point. Colombia had work to do if they were to qualify to the knockout stage. In Group H, England were on point but USA had to do more if they were to qualify.

In Group I, Netherlands were the clear favorites and they were not even playing with their food. If matchday 1 was any indication, Netherlands was ruthless.

In Group J, Portugal was on point. Senegal had to do more to qualify. In Group K, Uruguay was on point. They were one of the favorites to win the FIFA World Cup this year with their golden generation squad.

And finally, Group L had Belgium who were favorites for the FIFA World Cup for the past 3 iterations of the FIFA World Cup.

If matchday 1 was any indication, they were on point for knockout stage qualification.

Matchday 1 was over; the 48 countries now had practical experience to address their team flaws, make changes if needed, and improve because matchday 2 would be an even more brutal showdown.

And finally, the world focused on matchday 2 of the FIFA World Cup.

(2026 FIFA World Cup fixtures:)

(Group Stage – Matchday 2:)

(GROUP A:)

(Ghana vs Japan)

(Venue: BC Place, Canada)

(Date: June 20th, 2026)

(Time: 14:00)

...

(GROUP A:)

(Poland vs Mexico)

(Venue: Estadio Guadalajara, Mexico)

(Date: June 20th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

...

(GROUP B:)

(Morocco vs South Korea)

(Venue: Lumen Field, USA)

(Date: June 21st, 2026)

(Time: 15:00)

...

(GROUP B:)

(Peru vs France)

(Venue: Estadio BBVA, Mexico)

(Date: June 21st, 2026)

(Time: 18:00)

...

(GROUP C:)

(Serbia vs Australia)

(Venue: Lincoln Financial Field, USA)



(Date: June 22nd, 2026)

(Time: 14:00)

...

(GROUP C:)

(Egypt vs Brazil)

(Venue: MetLife Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 22nd, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

...

(GROUP D:)

(Chile vs Argentina)

(Venue: SoFi Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 23rd, 2026)

(Time: 15:00)

...

(GROUP D:)

(Qatar vs Norway)

(Venue: BMO Field, Canada)

(Date: June 23rd, 2026)

(Time: 15:00)

...

(GROUP E:)

(Croatia vs Canada)

(Venue: BC Place, Canada)

(Date: June 24th, 2026)

(Time: 16:00)

...

(GROUP E:)

(Saudi Arabia vs Nigeria)

(Venue: Estadio Monterrey, Mexico)

(Date: June 24th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

...

(GROUP F:)

(Iran vs New Zealand)

(Venue: Lumen Field, USA)

(Date: June 25th, 2026)

(Time: 14:00)

...

(GROUP F:)

(Italy vs Spain)

(Venue: NRG Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 25th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

...

(GROUP G:)

(Colombia vs Iraq)

(Venue: Mercedes-Benz Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 26th, 2026)

(Time: 16:00)

...

(GROUP G:)

(Honduras vs Germany)

(Venue: AT&T Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 26th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

...

(GROUP H:)

(Algeria vs USA)

(Venue: Estadio BBVA, Mexico)

(Date: June 27th, 2026)

(Time: 15:00)

...

(GROUP H:)

(Slovenia vs England)

(Venue: MetLife Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 27th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

...

(GROUP I:)

(China vs Ukraine)

(Venue: BC Place, Canada)

(Date: June 28th, 2026)

(Time: 14:00)

...

(GROUP I:)

(Tunisia vs Netherlands)

(Venue: SoFi Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 28th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

...

(GROUP J:)

(Senegal vs Czech Republic)

(Venue: NRG Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 29th, 2026)

(Time: 16:00)



...

(GROUP J:)

(Iraq vs Portugal)

(Venue: Estadio Azteca, Mexico)

(Date: June 29th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

...

(GROUP K:)

(DR Congo vs Switzerland)

(Venue: Estadio Guadalajara, Mexico)

(Date: June 30th, 2026)

(Time: 14:00)

...

(GROUP K:)

(Costa Rica vs Uruguay)

(Venue: Lincoln Financial Field, USA)

(Date: June 30th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

...

(GROUP L:)

(Sweden vs Belgium)

(Venue: Mercedes-Benz Stadium, USA)

(Date: July 1st, 2026)

(Time: 15:00)

...

(GROUP L:)

(Paraguay vs Ecuador)

(Venue: Estadio BBVA, Mexico)

(Date: July 1st, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

The stage was set.

Now... action.

## Chapter 486: FIFA World Cup 2026 [17]

Matchday 1 of the FIFA World Cup 2026 came to an end on 19th June, and just the next day, with no rest day in between, matchday 2 started.

Of course, the clubs that were to play on 20th June already had more than enough time to rest and prepare for their next games.

Matchday 2 of the FIFA World Cup was opened by 2 Group A countries, Ghana and Japan this time.

The African and Asian countries clashed in the biggest stage of football.

(GROUP A:)

(Ghana vs Japan)

(Venue: BC Place, Canada)

(Date: June 20th, 2026)

(Time: 14:00)

In their matchday 1 encounters, Ghana got the maximum 3 points against Mexico while Japan could only settle for a draw against Poland.

And now, these 2 countries clashed.

The pressure was on Japan to win their first game of the tournament to amass points as soon as possible, while Ghana were also under pressure to win their second game of the tournament to secure their knockout stage qualification.

With the likes of Kamada and Kauro Mitoma in the Japanese lineup, they held nothing back on the afternoon. But the same thing could be said for the Ghanian side as they lined up with the likes of Thomas Partey, Mohamed Kudus, and Jordan Ayew all on the pitch.

FWEEE!

The game started and all hell broke loose.

Both nations held nothing back, playing their trademark football.

But they were cautious at the back. After all, despite the fact that they wanted to win, what they wanted even more than winning was to not lose.

And so, both countries played their hearts out without being too risky in attack so that their backline would not be exposed in a turnover.

The first half came to an end in a goalless draw.

In the 77th minute, Karou Mitoma finally opened the scoring only for it to be ruled out for a foul involved in the buildup.

Ghana never found the back of the net, but that was ok.

The fulltime whistle sounded after an exciting 90 minutes clash, and at the end, both countries shared the spoils.

The game ended 0-0.

...

(GROUP A:)

(Poland vs Mexico)

(Venue: Estadio Guadalajara, Mexico)

(Date: June 20th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

6 hours after Ghana and Japan's clash, Poland took on Mexico in another Group A encounter.

Both countries were under pressure to perform. And early in the first half, Poland opened the scoring, the ageless Lewandowski scoring from a header to make it 1-0 at just 6 minutes.

Poland maintained their lead through the first half to the second, for majority of the game till Mexico tore them open in the 78th minute.

Mexican midfielder, Alvarado sent the Estadio Guadalajara aflame as he scored a piledriver from 30 yards out, stunning Poland.

78 minutes, 1-1.

All of Poland's hard work for almost 80 minutes went down the drain just like that. But it was not over yet, the final 10 minutes of this game was a classic.

During the final 10 minutes, both countries upped the tempo, desperate to get the winner and get their FIFA World Cup campaign ignited.

Poland did it again, Piatkowski scoring to make it 2-1 in the 86th minute.

But then in additional time, Mexico spoiled the party a second time, Vasquez rising highest from a corner kick, heading home to make it 2-2.

BOOM!

The Estadio Guadalajara exploded, local Mexican fans celebrating exuberantly.

The game came to an end 2-2.

What a game.

...

(GROUP B:)

(Morocco vs South Korea)

(Venue: Lumen Field, USA)

(Date: June 21st, 2026)

(Time: 15:00)

The next day, Morocco took on South Korea in USA in the first Group B clash of matchday 2.



Having suffered defeat to France in matchday 1, Morocco were out for blood but South Korea was up for the fight.

South Korea scored first in the 12th minute only for Morocco to equalize in the 18th minute. 2 rapid fire goals made it clear that this game was going to be a classic, and as the minutes progressed, football fans were not disappointed.

The game was a banger.

Just before halftime, South Korea stunned Morocco, scoring twice in the 43rd and 44th minute to make it 1-3, leaving the Africans stunned.

But Morocco refused to accept their fate.

In the 2nd half, the Atlas Lions came out of their shell like ancient predators who finally woke up from a millennium of slumber.

Morocco pushed forward in attack like mad men on an impossible mission.

Achraf Hakimi played more like a winger than a right back this second half, spearheading the attack for Morocco from the right with his electric pace and skill.

Despite Morocco's effort, South Korea stayed compact, playing their game, frustrating Morocco till the Moroccan captain took matters into his own hand.

It happened in the 70th minute.

Taking the ball from deep, Achraf Hakimi ran like a hurricane, penetrating deep into the South Korean defense, obliterating players with his electric pace and skill and just as the goalkeeper charged out, he poked the ball underneath his legs, scoring a cheeky goal.

"C'MON!!!" Hakimi screamed at the fans at the top of the lungs, giving the Moroccan fans a new mission.

His roar had one significance, a very important one; there was still hope.

And so, the fans roared, turning the stadium into a cauldron of noise.

South Korea played their game, Morocco also played their game. Morocco pushed, fueled by the energy of their fans, but South Korea stood their ground, till the final 10 minutes of the game.

Just like yesterday's game between Poland and Mexico, magic happened in the final 10 minutes of this clash as Morocco entered Super Saiyan mode.

Brahim Diaz exploded to life in the 81st minute, playing a series of one two passes with Achraf Hakimi before exploding into the box and unleashing a powerful shot at goal that beat the goalkeeper.

3-3!

The stadium was going haywire.

3-3 now, and yet Morocco was not done.

6 minutes later, in the 87th minute of the game, Achraf Hakimi did it again, floating the ball into the net for En-Nesyri to leap highest, connecting to the ball to score and make it 4-3.

BOOM!

The stadium exploded.

In additional time, South Korea tried everything to draw back level but they could not do it.

The game came to an end 4-3 in Morocco's favor.

Achraf Hakimi won the man of the match award.

Chapter 487: FIFA World Cup 2026 [18]

After Morocco vs South Korea 3 hours earlier, the final Group B game of June 21st was finally scheduled to be played.

Unlike Morocco's game that took place in USA, the final Group B game of the day took place in Mexico.

(GROUP B:)

(Peru vs France)

(Venue: Estadio BBVA, Mexico)

(Date: June 21st, 2026)

(Time: 18:00)

Having gotten 3 points already from their first group stage encounter, France would have one leg in the knockout stage already if they managed to win against Peru tonight.

Both nations started with their best lineups.

Peru started in a 4-2-3-1 formation with Gallese in between the posts; ahead of him stood a defensive quadruple of Lopez, Garces, Zambrano, and Advincula. In midfield was the duo of Aquino and Tapia.

Flores played attacking midfield, with Polo in right wing and Reyna in left wing. Guerrero led the line for Peru as the striker.

If Peru was to stand any chance at beating France tonight, they would have to go beyond their limits in attack while making sure that their defense remained a wall against one of the best teams of the tournament.

Could they do it?

Against this French side?

France started in a similar 4-2-3-1 lineup with Mike Maignan in between the posts, and ahead of him standing a solid defensive quadruple of Theo Hernandez in left back, William Saliba and Ibrahima Konate in center back, while Barcelona's Jules Kounde played in right back.

In midfield was the duo of Adrien Rabiot and Aurelien Tchouameni , while further ahead of them in attack was the dynamic front four of Michael Olise in attacking midfield, Ousmane Dembele on the right, Desire Doue on the left, and Kylian Mbappe leading the line as the striker.

This was a world-beating France squad if all the individual gears clicked for the team to function.

And unfortunately for Peru, tonight, France had no intentions of playing nice.

Unfortunately for them, tonight, France clicked.

FWEEEE!

GOAL!

That was how fast the 1st goal of the game came.

The referee barely blew his whistle when Michael Olise received the ball, raising it above the Peru defense who were caught off-guard for Kylian Mbappe to chase. None of the defenders was fast enough to keep up with Mbappe's speed.

The game barely started and yet Peru were already caught lacking. Kylian Mbappe didn't miss his moment, hitting the ball in a volley and sending it into the back of the net.

1 minute, 0-1.

That was ominous for Peru but they couldn't pay attention to it.

After all, they still had 89 minutes of this game to play.

The game continued and one thing immediately became clear, France had no intentions of reducing the tempo of the game.

From their backline to their solid midfield, France dominated the game, hoarding possession, penetrating Peru with ruthless passes and electric dribbling displays from the dynamic front four.

In the 23rd minute, Kylian Mbappe doubled his tally for the night, scoring the second goal of the game from an Ousmane Dembele cross across the face of goal.

Peru were barely hanging on as the game progressed.

And yet, somehow, their defense survived despite the onslaught of attacks till the 40th minute when Kylian Mbappe was fouled just outside the box.

Michael Olise played the freekick and the Estadio BBVA erupted in Mexico as the Frenchman played an accurate freekick, scoring the third goal of the game.

"OH MY WORLD!" The commentators raved.

"WHAT A BEAUTY!"

"Michael Olise, you boy! What a strike!"

And just like that, France were 3 goals ahead already.

Late in the first half, just before the halftime whistle, Peru finally managed to get their goal from a clinical counterattack, their striker, Guerrero scoring to reduce the deficit.

Second half started, and Peru's plight didn't improve.

Kylian Mbappe came close to getting his hattrick multiple times in the second half, but in the end, it was Desire Doue who got the 4th French goal of the game.

Receiving the ball from the left, the electric PSG winger wriggled his way into the box with his silky dribbling before unleashing a grounded shot into the net.

That was the final goal of the game.

The game ended 1-4 in France's favor.

...

The next day, June 22nd, Serbia took on Australia in the first FIFA World Cup game of the day, a game that ended 1-1 after fulltime.

On that same day, another epic Group C encounter took place.

This time, it was between Egypt and Brazil.

(GROUP C:)

(Egypt vs Brazil)

(Venue: MetLife Stadium, USA)



(Date: June 22nd, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

A giant of African football took on an even bigger giant of South American football in a blockbuster FIFA World Cup encounter.

Both countries held nothing back in this epic encounter.

Egypt started in a 4-2-3-1 formation with El Shenawy in between the posts as the goalkeeper, while ahead of him was a defensive quadruple comprising Hany, Rabia, Abdelmonem, and Trezeguet.

In midfield was the duo of Attia and Koka. Sayed played as the attacking midfielder, Mohamed leading the line as the striker, but it was the two wingers that were the double spearheads of this team.

Mohamed Salah took his position in right wing, while Omar Marmoush played as a left winger on the afternoon.

As for Brazil? They started in a 4-3-3 formation with Alisson Becker at the back as the goalkeeper, while ahead of him stood a defensive quadruple of Sandro, Alessandro, Marquinhos, and Vanderson.

In midfield was a dynamic trio of Casemiro, Bruno Guimaraes, and Gerson, while in attack was the attacking trio of Vinicius Junior, Raphinha, and Rodrygo.

Neymar was benched for this game, allowing the dynamic offensive trio of Vinicius, Raphinha, and Rodrygo to enjoy themselves on the pitch as Carlo Ancelotti took the radical decision of playing Raphinha as a striker.

It was a blockbuster game, and as soon as the referee's whistle sounded, the players on the pitch showed exactly why the game was dubbed so.

FWEEE!

That signal felt like a war horn than a signal to kickstart a football game.

All hell broke loose.

Chapter 488: FIFA World Cup 2026 [19]

Egypt was a strong team, one of the best African footballing nations, but Brazil was just on a whole other level.

They may not be performing up to standards in recent years, but statistically, they were the best footballing nation in the history of football.

On the pitch, that element became the deciding factor.

FWEEEE!

The final whistle sounded, bringing the game to an end.

1-3 to Brazil.

Egypt fought valiantly in the first half, but their quality of players simply couldn't match against the quality of Brazilian players spread across the pitch, leading to them suffering for large swathes of the first half.

Vinicius Jnr. got the first goal of the game in the 31st minute, a Raphinha pass setting him up to run behind the defense, then a shift and shuffle with the ball before cutting in and shooting into the bottom right corner of the net.

The first half came to an end 0-1 to Brazil.

The second half barely started though when Mohamed Salah surged to life, receiving the ball at the right before spotting a run and playing an unreal trivela pass that cut through most of the field, evading all the Brazilian defenders before slowing down in front of an onrushing Omar Marmoush.

BAM!

One touch, one goal.

Marmoush rifled the ball into the roof of the net with his first touch.

But that equalizer only riled Brazil up more.

The Brazilian attack came to life, buzzing as they searched for the 2nd goal to no avail. Egypt defended for their life till Neymar was introduced into the game, replacing Vinicius Jnr.

6 minutes after Neymar entered the game in the 65th minute, Brazil got a freekick in the 71st minute of the game.

Neymar took the penalty kick, and then...

"GOALLLLLLL...!!!"

The MetLife Stadium in USA melted as Neymar stole the show.

He charged towards the corner flag, eyes dilated in excitement as he celebrated with his teammates, Brazilian fans roaring excitedly.

That goal took the momentum from Egypt.

Egypt became shaky, and Brazil was merciless. They were ruthless, and they capitalized in Egypt's moment of weakness.

Neymar set up Raphinha with a silky lobbed pass behind the defense. Raphinha sped past the Egyptian defenders, going round the goalkeeper before scoring the 3rd goal of the game.

Neymar and Raphinha got a goal and assist each, but at the end of the game, Neymar got the man of the match award.

Brazil won 1-3.

...

The next day, Chile took on Argentina.

It was another blockbuster encounter.

Both countries were opponents with a great history and rivalry in South American football, most of their vendetta developed from their Copa America clashes over the years.

Chile was the country that made Lionel Messi cry back in 2016 after stealing another Copa America trophy from them, so this was an epic game with bragging rights on the line.

Both countries played with only one intention in mind, to win.

It was a tight game filled with a lot of fouls, the players of both countries abusing their physicality, turning the battle into a brawl.

The first half ended goalless.

The second half was filled with even more venom as the referee brandished his yellow card a few times just to keep the situation under control.

The game was tight, all indications pointed to a goalless draw.

But then, a single man entered the pitch and changed the narrative.

In the 70th minute, Lionel Messi was introduced into the game, replacing Lautaro Martinez.

In the 83rd minute, Messi struck.

He unleashed an absolute piledriver from almost 30 yards out, rolling back the years as the ball flew with speed and power before finding its way into the back of the net, setting the stadium aflame.

The game came to an end 0-1 in Argentina's favor.

...

On that same day, there was another Group D encounter, this time being a clash between Qatar and Norway.

Qatar stood no chance.

They tried, trying their best to cause problems but they could do very little as Norway's elite strikers stole the show, Alexander Sorloth and Erling Haaland sharing the goals, getting one each to end the contest.

The game ended 0-2 in Norway's favor.

...

The next day, on June 24th, Croatia took on Canada in the first Group E encounter of matchday 2.

Having lost their first group stage game against Nigeria, Croatia were under pressure to win a game and get maximum points to keep their World Cup hopes alive. They entered the pitch to win.

Unfortunately for them, Canada entered the pitch with the same intention, to win and they had the tools to do it.

The first half of this game was a tight affair between 2 dynamic nations, Croatia leaning on their composed, passing, and heavy midfield-reliant playstyle while Canada leaned on a counterattacking style.

Luka Modric had the best game of his career in years, bossing the midfield battle while also producing the goods in the other end of the pitch.

In the 22nd minute, Luka Modric tore Canada's defense open, threading a defense splitting through pass for Ante Budimir who manhandled his marker with his physicality before scoring with his left foot.

Canada didn't stay silent though. Canada's captain, Alphonso Davies led by example, winning the ball from deep before going on an incredible solo run.

Alphonso Davies dribbled through 5 different Croatian players in his path, driving deeper till he penetrated into the 18-yard box where he passed to Jonathan David only for the striker to play a one two with him, setting him up for a shot.

Davies didn't hesitate.

BAM!

He struck, and... GOAL!

1-1, in the 37th minute.

The first half came to an end in a draw, 1-1.

The second half started and once again, Croatia hoarded possession, the ageless Luka Modric dictating play but it was not meant to happen for him today.



In the 65th minute, Jonathan David crushed Modric's dreams, receiving the ball before shooting and scoring from outside the box to make it 1-2.

That goal infused Croatia with urgency.

They fought, they searched for the goal to no avail. But then, in the 88th minute, Modric did it again, this time hitting a trivela pass into Perisic's path who simply tapped the ball past the goalkeeper and into the net.

Luka Modric played his heart out on the pitch, but he could only settle for a 2-2 draw.

Modric left the pitch in tears.

Chapter 489: FIFA World Cup 2026 [20]

On this day, June 24th, 2026, Croatia, one of the biggest footballing nations in recent years with their best legend, Luka Modric became one of the first of the nations in the FIFA World Cup 2026 to be eliminated in the group stage.

By losing their first game to Nigeria and going on to draw against Canada, Croatia's hopes of making it to the knockout stage became as good as null.

It would take a miracle for them to make it at this point.

On that same day that one of the best footballing legends of the 21st century potentially bowed out of the FIFA World Cup 2026, another legend, a new one, just 20 years old made his final preparations to take to the pitch for his 2nd career FIFA World Cup game.

Sam prepared to take the FIFA World Cup stage the 2nd time for his country.

But earlier, a day before the D-day...

It was the Nigeria National Team Training Camp in Kansas City, USA.

The time was 5:45pm, a day before the fated match.

The sun dipped low over the training complex, casting long shadows across the perfectly trimmed pitch.

Cicadas hummed softly in the background, but the tension in the air drowned them out. This wasn't just another practice. It was the final session before Nigeria's crucial second group stage match against Saudi Arabia.

A cluster of players stood in a semi-circle around Coach Eric Chelle, who was barking final instructions in his unmistakable gravelly voice.

Yes, Nigeria was in a favorable condition compared to most other nations in their group.

After all, they won their first game, but to Eric Chelle, it didn't matter.

That was just 1 game. If they wanted to fulfill their crazy ambitions this tournament, they had to stay 100% at all times, physically and mentally, and it was the coach's duty to make sure that his players were at their best.

Behind him, the Nigerian flag flapped gently in the breeze.

Sweat gleamed on the foreheads of defenders and midfielders alike, but all eyes subtly drifted toward one man, Sam.

He stood at the edge of the circle, lacing up his custom gold-trimmed Nike boots, boots that had scored 77 goals just this season even before the FIFA World Cup started.

Boots that had silenced the Bernabeu and brought the Spotify Camp Nou to its feet, boots that performed in the biggest stages of the UEFA champions league, boots that pulled off miracles at the AFCON.

His aura wasn't arrogant, just heavy.

Heavy with expectation. With history. With the burden of a nation.

These days, his teammates rarely remembered his true age. Rather, all they saw was a maverick, a demon incarnate capable of singlehandedly winning games.

Sam had done it at the NPFL, the English Premier League, the Spanish La Liga, the UEFA Champions League, and now, he was already doing it at the World Cup.

Having won the man of the match award for Nigeria's first group stage game against Croatia, a game that he dominated, Sam's prestige in this team transcended from just respect to literal mythic.

"Sam," Coach Erich Chelle called, pausing and turning his gaze toward him. "Last time out, you did your job to perfection. I can't find faults in your game, but tomorrow, you'll need to be twice as sharp".

"Forget that it's Saudi Arabia. They'll target you. They'll build a wall around you".

It was clear that Croatia underestimated Sam's influence, and they paid for their negligence dearly. But Eric Chelle doubted that Saudi Arabia would make the same mistake; this was why he felt the need to warn his star striker.

Sam nodded slightly, wiping sweat from his brow, his expression unreadable. Calm. Focused.

He didn't need to speak. His silence was thunder, unshakable will and focus.

The training continued. The team split up. Sam jogged over to the far end of the pitch, where the Assistant Coach had set up a custom drill for him.

Two defenders, a goalkeeper, and a swarm of cones lined the path from midfield to goal.

Sam's task? Break through, beat the press, finish.

His first run was clean. A quick feint, one-touch past the center-back, a subtle flick of the ball, and then... BOOM! Top right corner.

His second run was tighter. The defenders got physical.

Sam spun between them, caught the ball behind him, and volleyed it while falling; still on target, still a goal.

By the fifth run, teammates paused their own drills to watch.

Even the assistant kitman stopped, folding bibs to mutter. "This boy's a demon with the ball". He could not help the grin creeping up his face.

From Day 1 since arriving in USA for the FIFA World Cup, this was the level that Sam trained at, all his focus already honed in on the FIFA World Cup, the biggest tournament he could ever play on in his career.

Sam was ready to lose himself like Eminem; he was ready to steal the shine.

After warm-downs, Coach Eric Chelle gathered everyone mid-pitch.

"This isn't just about tactics, it's pride," he began. "Saudi Arabia will come out strong. We respect them. But we don't fear them".

He turned again to Sam.

"You're not just our striker. You're our symbol. But remember, you're not alone. Don't play selfishly".

"You draw fire, others will move. Trust them; trust your teammates. Lead them". He looked straight at him. "Finish them".

Sam finally spoke, voice low but firm with confidence. "They mark me, we score. They leave me, I score. Either way, we win".

His teammates grinned, the team roaring in approval. Fists bumped.

The sun had now vanished, but under the floodlights, their eyes burned brighter than ever.

...

Dozens of minutes later...

As the others trickled off to the locker room, Sam stayed behind. He stood at the penalty spot, staring at the empty goal. One ball left.

He ran up, struck it clean, no theatrics. Just pure precision. The net rippled.

He whispered under his breath. "For Nigeria".

Then he turned, and walked into the tunnel; calm, focused, ready to become a legend.

...

Back to present...

(GROUP E:)

(Saudi Arabia vs Nigeria)

(Venue: Estadio Monterrey, Mexico)

(Date: June 24th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

Chapter 490: FIFA World Cup 2026 [21]

(GROUP E:)

(Saudi Arabia vs Nigeria)

(Venue: Estadio Monterrey, Mexico)

(Date: June 24th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

The Estadio Monterrey in Mexico had never hosted anything like this.

The stands were split down the middle; one half a sea of vibrant green, the Nigerian faithful draped in agbadas, waving flags and beating talking drums with synchronized fury.

The other half shimmered with the white and green of the Saudi Arabian supporters, chants rising like desert winds in unison.

"Al-Suqour!" They chanted.

There was a thrum in the air; more than excitement.

It was anticipation.

This wasn't just a game, it was a collision of rhythm and resolve.



Cameras flashed. Fans screamed. And on the sideline, Sam, Nigeria's golden boy stood with hands on hips, eyes closed for a second as if to bottle up the storm around him. Then he opened them.

Focus. Time to hunt.

Time to fight for glory, and passion.

Both nations held nothing back. Nigeria started with the same lineup that they played against Croatia with, while Saudi Arabia started with a slightly tweaked lineup of players.

Starting in their regular 4-3-3 formation, Alaqidi started in between the posts while ahead of him stood a defensive quadruple of Boushal, Kadesh, Tambakti, and Ali Majrashi.

The midfield comprised the trio of Aljuwayr, Aljohani, and Kanno. As for the attack, the trio comprised Yahya in right wing, Al-Dawsari in left wing, and Al-Burakikan through the middle as the striker.

It was the current best Saudi Arabian lineup. And tonight, under the night sky of Mexico, they got set to play another game to die for.

The atmosphere in the stadium was electric, then...

FWEEEE!

The game started.

From the kickoff, it was clear; Saudi Arabia had done their homework.

Unlike Croatia who underestimated their opponents, Saudi Arabia approached this game with the knowledge and acceptance that they were the underdogs, and they prepared accordingly.

They were going to play as the underdogs.

Their setup was surgical; tight lines, compressed zones, and one main mission: neutralize Sam.

It sounded funny, but just like Coach Eric Chelle predicted, the Saudi Arabian coach took it even a step further, basing his entire setup on neutralizing Sam.

Every time he received the ball, three players collapsed on him; a wall of pressure, an echo of studs and shoulders. They were ready to rough up Nigeria's best player and rattle him with their physicality and aggression.

The Saudi Arabian captain barked orders, and Sam was double-marked, then triple-marked, forced wide, forced deep.

And for a while... it worked.

Nigeria looked disjointed. Without the calming and ever-present aura of Sam dominant on the pitch, dictating the game from attacking midfield, Nigeria lost cohesion and direction.

Possession was scattered, and the midfield struggled to find rhythm.

Then, on a quick counter in the 29th minute, Saudi Arabia struck.

A loose ball near the halfway line was scooped up by Aljuwayr, the elegant Saudi Arabian playmaker.

He surged forward, untouched, and with a deft shimmy on the edge of the box, he let fly a rocket into the top right corner.

Stanley Nwabali, Nigeria's goalkeeper could only watch in despair as it screamed past his fingertips like a thunderbolt.

1.0. The Estadio Monterrey erupted.

Saudi Arabian fans chanted like thunder, their voices rising like a wave and slamming against the roof of this stadium, turning it into a cauldron of noise.

Sam stood near the center, unmoving, eyes narrowed.

He wasn't frustrated, not yet. He was calculating.

This game was unusual for him, but not unfamiliar. It was the type of game where the underdog was 150% prepared to deal with your and your weapons.

That goal... it ignited something in Sam already.

The tight marking, the harassing since, all of it already left his blood boiling.

His eyes were already dilated, adrenaline surging through his veins.

His mind?

'Win!' 'Win!' 'Win!'

That familiar voice was already rearing its head.

The first half came to an end 1-0, Saudi Arabia leading.

Nigeria's locker room at halftime was silent. No yelling. No panic. Coach Erich Chelle simply walked back and forth through the dressing room before sharply turning and walking towards his star player.

"They built a cage. Break it". He said.

And that was all it took.

When the second half resumed, Sam returned to the pitch transformed; not frantic, but sharp, locked into a zone state.

He was already levitating, floating in the state of flow.

The look in his eyes was different.

And when the game started, he began drifting into odd spaces, dropping deep, pulling wide, dragging defenders out of their comfort zone.

Sam exploded, taking a free role all of a sudden in this game.

He was everywhere.

And then came the 63rd minute.

Sam received a pass with his back to goal, 35 yards out.

Three defenders swarmed him, but he spun, feinted, then flicked a pass behind them with the outside of his boot, a no-look diagonal ball that split the defense like a seam in fabric. Like a hot knife through butter.

Whoosh!

Victor Osimhen exploded onto the ball, took one touch, and slotted it past the goalkeeper with a powerful shot.

1-1!

The stadium exploded, the equalizer that Nigerian fans prayed for finally!

The drums came back alive. The fans roared Sam's name, roars of Osimhen joining the mix as they acknowledged both players.

That goal increased the tension on the pitch, making the atmosphere hit a crescendo, rising to a fever pitch.

By now, Saudi Arabia's shape was breaking gradually. They'd chased Sam for 70 minutes, and he had dragged them into deep waters.

The Saudi Arabian players were tired.

Sam? His stamina still kept him going like a horse.

And then in the 78th minute, he exploded a second time in this tight game.

In the 78th minute, Nigeria launched a counterattack. It was a blur.

Wilfried to Iwobi, Iwobi to Sam. He was on the edge of the box. One touch, a pause. He looked up.

Then... a gap. He saw it. The kind you only see if you're in the zone.

He dropped his shoulder, cut between two defenders, then buried it, low and lethal, right footed, far post. The goalkeeper stood no chance!

The net snapped. The goalkeeper didn't even move.

2-1, Nigeria.

BOOM!

The Estadio Monterrey exploded a third time this game.

Sam sprinted to the corner flag, arms wide, face eerily calm, playing the cold persona, masking his inner untamable joy, but his teammates mobbed him, chanting.

"Sam!" "Sam!" "Sam!"

"Sam, you bastard!" Osimhen roared, jumping on his back in celebration.

The game was not yet over though.

The final minutes of the game were for the history books.

Saudi Arabia fought back, desperate and brutal.

Aljuwayr hit the crossbar in the 89th minute, Al-Dawsari being a menace throughout with his dribbling.

A flurry of corners, a penalty appeal waved away, physicality abused like a drug but the Nigerian defenders stood strong to the test.

The pressure from the desperate Saudi Arabians was fierce, but Nigerian, now unified and emboldened held strong.

Wilfried Ndidi anchored. Bassey cleared. Stanley Nwabali punched away crosses like a man possessed.

When the final whistle blew, the night sky erupted with fireworks.



Sam collapsed to his knees, fists clenched. Not from exhaustion, but from victory earned the hard way.

"What a game". He muttered.