

Football God 511

Chapter 511: FIFA World Cup 2026 [42]

At the same time as Portugal took on Czech Republic at the AT&T, Senegal also took on Iraq at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium in USA.

(GROUP J:)

(Senegal vs Iraq)

(Venue: Mercedes-Benz Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 27th, 2026)

(Time: 20:00)

Senegal vs Iraq was pretty straight forward.

Senegal approached the game with a firm iron hand, and they dominated. The game ended 2-0 in Senegal's favor, the 2 goals coming in the first half, a lead that Senegal held on to till the end of the game.

With that result, all the Group J games came to an end.

Czech Republic secured qualification, but it was due to being part of the best 3rd-placed teams in the group stage.

With Senegal's win over Iraq, Senegal maintained their 2nd position in the league, sending them straight to the knockouts.

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(GROUP K:)

(Uruguay vs Switzerland)

(Venue: Estadio Azteca, Mexico)

(Date: June 28th, 2026)

(Time: 15:00)

The next day after the Portugal, Czech Republic, and Senegal thrillers in USA, football fans moved to Mexico for another blockbuster FIFA World Cup clash at the Estadio Azteca in Mexico.

It was a clash between 2 fierce South American teams.

In high altitude, with the temperature hot and electric, there were over 87,000 fans in attendance at the stadium.

It was a game when giants collide at altitude.

This was more than football, this was a battle of pride in one of the world's most iconic stadiums.

The stakes were monumental: winner tops Group K, loser risks a trickier knockout path. The Azteca was drowning in green; a sea of Mexican support, chanting, hoping.

But Uruguay?

Uruguay came to kill giants quietly. They had one of the most fearsome teams in the World Cup. Their blend of old-school grit and new-age dynamism was ready to test Mexico's fire.

Mexico started in a 4-3-3, Guillermo Ochoa playing another World Cup for Mexico as the captain, with a defensive quadruple of Jorge Sanchez, Cesar Montes, Johan Vasquez, and Gallardo standing in front of him.

In midfield was the trio of Edson Alvarez, Luis Chavez, and Erick Gutierrez, while the attacking trio were Chucky Lozano, Santi Gimenez, and Uriel Antuna.

As for Uruguay, they started in a 4-2-3-1 formation. Sergio Rochet started in goal as the goalkeeper, a defensive quadruple of Ronald Araujo, Jose Maria Gimenez, Coates, and Matias Vina sitting ahead of him in defense.

The midfield had Ugarte, Valverde, De La Cruz, Pellistri, and Facundo Torres, while Darwin Nunez led the line as the striker.

The first half was a game of blow for blow.

Mexico roared out of the tunnel like a team possessed. Lozano tore down the flanks, while Edson Alvarez anchored the midfield like a bulldozer.

But Uruguay absorbed. And waited, like patient hunters. Assassins.

And then, they struck early, as early as the 15th minute.

Valverde sprayed a switch to Pellistri, who burned Gallardo and cut the ball low into the six-yard box. Nunez timed his run perfectly and smashed it into the net with a thunderous hit.

Uruguay 1-0 Mexico.

Silence. Then whistles all over the stadium.

Mexico regrouped.

And then, they responded in the 33rd minute from a set piece.

It was a set piece masterpiece. Luis Chavez delivered a floating free kick, and Santi Gimenez rose high to bullet a header past Rochet, setting the stadium aflame in Mexican cheers.

BOOM!

Mexican fans roared at the top of their lungs. Azteca erupted like a volcano.

1-1.

But just as Mexico found rhythm, Uruguay struck again in the 43rd minute of the game.

This time, it was the Uruguayan captain, Federico Valverde.

A half-clearance fell to the Real Madrid man 25 yards out. One touch to control the ball, one look, and then...

POW!

A missile into the top corner. Ochoa dived, but he never stood a chance.

2-1, just like that.

A captain's goal. A silencer.

The first half of the game came to an end with Uruguay leading.

When the second half came about, Mexico went all-in. Antuna was relentless. Lozano danced through defenders. Chavez tried from range, twice. But Uruguay dug trenches.

Ugarte and Valverde covered every blade of Azteca grass. Gimenez and Coates won everything aerial. Every minute felt longer than the last.

And then in the 74th minute, the fans had their hearts in their throats as Uruguay's Rochet made a double save, denying Lozano and Chavez!

It was crazy. The atmosphere was just insane.

Lozano fired low from inside the box, Rochet saved with his feet. Chavez pounced on the rebound, Rochet clawed it wide.

World-class. Game-saving.

Sergio Rochet could save the f*cking Titanic!

The final minutes were even more action-packed.

Berterame came on for Mexico. So did Orbelin Pineda. Mexico threw everyone forward in a bid to attack and get the equalizer.

And then, in the 90th plus 3 minute, Chavez went down in the box.

Screams! From the players and fans.

But VAR confirmed: it was a clean tackle by Coates. Azteca howled in disbelief and grief as Mexican fans wallowed in regret.

Nothing they did could stop it. Uruguay won the bragging rights battle. The game came to an end 2-1 in Uruguay's favor.

And with that result, Uruguay topped Group K with 9 points. Mexico also finished second with 4 points and advanced to the knockouts.

It was a footballing classic played in one of the sport's great temples.

The man of the match award? Federico Valverde, Uruguay's captain scooped it home with his 1 goal which was a screamer, 4 tackles, 5 ball recoveries, and 2 key passes to round up an imperious midfield performance.

When Uruguay needed calm and fire, El Halcon gave them both.

The post-match reactions showed just how proud the players of both teams were by their respective performances.

Darwin Nunez stood in front of the media.

"We love these moments. In their fortress, under pressure, and we showed our teeth".

Guillermo Ochoa, the veteran goalkeeper also had a word or two to say.

"We fought. We leave this game proud. But Uruguay were ruthless tonight".

Fox Sports Mexico? They went fully lyrical.

"A stinger in the Azteca. Mexico pushed, Mexico believed, but Uruguay? Uruguay executed".

The final Group K Standings had Uruguay in 1st with 9 points, Mexico in 2nd with 4 points, Switzerland in 3rd place with 4 points, advancing as one of the best third-placed teams, and DR Congo in 4th with 2 points, eliminated.

Uruguay marched into the round of 32 like a storm with discipline.

Mexico advanced battered, but unbroken, and eager to strike back.

Chapter 512: FIFA World Cup 2026 [43]

(GROUP K:)

(DR Congo vs Costa Rica)

(Venue: Estadio Monterrey, Mexico)

(Date: June 28th, 2026)

(Time: 15:00)

At the same time that Uruguay and Switzerland duked it out at the Estadio Azteca in Mexico, DR Congo and Costa Rica also took on each other in a blockbuster Group K encounter that ended with just 1 goal separating both countries.

DR Congo lost 0-1 to Costa Rica, and with that, Costa Rica qualified to the knockouts as the 2nd best team in Group K ahead of Switzerland.

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Group K drama was over, and a new Group took over the next day 29th.

(GROUP L:)

(Belgium vs Ecuador)

(Venue: MetLife Stadium, USA)

(Date: June 29th, 2026)

(Time: 19:00)

The atmosphere at the MetLife in USA was electric as Belgium and Ecuador lined up for the crucial final group stage game of their World Cup campaign.

There were over 77,000 fans in attendance at the MetLife.

The intensity level in the stadium was electric. It was win or go home for Ecuador.

Belgium? The pressure was also on them.

Group L had reached its final act. Belgium, with two draws in their opening games, 4-4 against a rampant Sweden, and then 1-1 against Paraguay, stood on the brink of elimination from the knockout stages.

Ecuador, with one loss and one win, needed at least a point, ideally more to control their fate in the World Cup.

It was tense, fierce, and frantic.

But when it mattered most, Belgium's old guard stood up. And one young gem rose with them.

Belgium started in their regular 3-4-2-1 formation. And this time, the Belgian coach finally let go of his pride, making peace with the Real Madrid goalkeeper, Thibaut Courtois and finally fielding him in the lineup.

Ahead of Thibaut Courtois, protecting him in defense was the trio of Faes, Vertonghen, and Theate. In midfield was the quadruple of Castagne, Onana, Tielemans, and Carrasco.

While in attack was Kevin De Bruyne, Jeremy Doku, and Romelu Lukaku who still led the Belgian national team as their starting striker.

As for Ecuador, they started in a 4-3-3 formation with Galindez in between the posts, and a defensive quadruple of Preciado, Torres, Hincapie, and Estupinian.

The midfield trio comprised Moises Caicedo, Mendez, and Sarmiento, while the attacking trio comprised Plata, Ener Valencia the strike who also captained the side, and Kevin Rodriguez.

The first half was a high stakes game of fast paced football.

Ecuador started the brighter of the two; energetic, aggressive, and fearless. Caicedo snapped into tackles, Plata darted at Faes repeatedly.

Belgium? They looked briefly rattled.

But then in the 12th minute, Belgium made a mistake.

Estupinian made a bursting overlap, and was clipped by Castagne just inside the box. The referee pointed to the spot immediately.

FWEEE!

Belgium tried to protest the decision but the referee paid them no heed.

Valencia, cool as a bird, buried it with trademark confidence.

0-1 to Ecuador.

But then, after going behind did Belgium respond.

They responded with urgency. Kevin De Bruyne, the Belgian maestro came to life and began orchestrating chaos, drifting wider to avoid Caicedo's pressure.

Doku, as always, was electric.

And then, in the 24th minute, the Manchester City winger got the equalizer, pulling Belgium out of the abyss.

Tielemans lofted a pass to Doku on the left. He cut inside, waltzed past Preciado and Hincapie, and smashed it low into the bottom corner.

1-1. Belgium was alive.

And with that, momentum shifted.

In the 38th minute, Romelu Lukaku added his name to the scoresheet.

It was a vintage Belgium counter. De Bruyne sprinted through the middle, drew defenders, and slipped it to Lukaku who didn't make a single mistake.

One touch to control the ball, then...

POW!

One powerful blast past Galindez.

2-1. MetLife shook.

The first half came to an end 2-1, Belgium holding on after completing a remontada in their final group stage game first half.

When second half started, Ecuador came out fighting.

Estupinian hit the post with a curling free kick in the 52nd minute. Kevin Rodriguez missed a golden header in the 58th. They had Belgium gasping, looking for straws, barely holding on.

Despite it all, Thibaut Courtois proved exactly why he was one of the best in the business, holding strong. And then Belgium struck the dagger.

It came in the 73rd minute, Kevin De Bruyne.

A moment of pure genius. He collected the ball 25 yards out, dipped his shoulder, and curled a left-footed beauty into the top corner.

Experience killed the Ecuadorian dream.

3-1. Game over. The Belgian maestro had spoken.

Ecuador had nothing else to do in the game. Of course, they tried, but they got no results. The game came to an end 3-1.

And with that win, Belgium managed to turn their fortunes around, finishing second in Group L with 5 points.

Ecuador, despite a valiant effort were eliminated.

And of course, Kevin De Bruyne won the man of the match award with his electric display of 1 goal, 1 assist, 7 key passes, and 2 successful dribbles.

Like his coach said, raving about his star creator.

"He reads the game like a novel he'd written himself".

Of course, there were post-match reactions, as Kevin De Bruyne was forced to say a piece of his mind in front of the media.

Still sweaty and panting, the Belgian said his piece.

"We were under pressure, sure. But when it mattered, we played like Belgium".

Jeremy Doku also had a piece.

"This was about pride more than anything else. People doubted us after the Sweden game. We answered". This was about pride more than anything else. People doubted us after the Sweden game. We answered".

The Ecuadorian captain, Moises Caicedo also faced the media heat.

"It hurts, yes, but I'm proud of how we fought. This team has a future. It's unfortunate that our journey here has to come to an end now".

...

Sweden topped Group L on goal difference, Belgium finished second, Ecuador out, Paraguay also out no matter their result against Sweden unless they managed to eclipse Belgium in goals difference.

Chapter 513: FIFA World Cup 2026 [44]

(GROUP L:)

(Paraguay vs Sweden)

(Venue: BC Place, Canada)

(Date: June 29th, 2026)

(Time: 19:00)

At the same time that Belgium and Ecuador duked it out at the MetLife, Sweden and Paraguay also confirmed their fates at the BC Place in Canada.

53,000 fans were in attendance.

The atmosphere was quiet at kickoff, but thunderous at the final whistle.

It was a tale of two halves; Sweden's stumble, and Paraguay's soar too late.

Paraguay came into this match needing a miracle: beat Sweden and pray for a favorable result in Belgium vs Ecuador.

Sweden, meanwhile, only needed a draw to guarantee top spot in Group L, but they were determined to finish with style.

And for a while, it looked like they would.

But Paraguay? Paraguay found fire in the second half, and nearly flipped the script on everything.

Sweden started in their usual 4-3-3, Robin Olsen in goal, Emil Krafth, Lindelof, Hien, and Augustinsson in defense, while Svanberg, Olsson, and Elanga were in midfield.

The Swedish attack comprised Kulusevski, Victor Gyokeres, and Alexander Isak.

As for Paraguay, lining up in a 4-4-2, they had Gatito Fernandez in front of goal, and a defensive quadruple of Espinoza, Balbuena, Gomez, and Arzamendia.

The midfield quadruple comprised Angel Romero, Cubas, Almiron, and Matias Roja, while the 2-man attack comprised Enciso, and Oscar Cardozo.

The first half was all Sweden, their players playing with a certain swagger that overwhelmed the Paraguayan resistance.

The Swedes started sharply. Kulusevski and Isak played with rhythm, constantly combining on the right. Paraguay looked pinned, boxed in.

And then, BOOM!

Goal in the 11th minute. Victor Gyokeres.

Kulusevski fired a wicked low cross across the face of goal, and Gyokeres smashed it home from close range.

1-0 Sweden.

They doubled their lead in the 27th minute through Alexander Isak.

This one was pure class. A cheeky one-two between Isak and Svanberg near the box, before Isak coolly dinked the goalkeeper to make it 2-0.

Sweden looked cruising. Paraguay looked crushed.

But momentum is a fragile thing.

The first half came to an end 2-0, all Sweden, and then, Paraguay made a halftime substitution, bringing on Antonio Sanabria and Derlis Gonzalez. And suddenly... energy!

Almiron pushed further forward. Cubas pressed higher. And all of a sudden, Sweden looked rattled.

Paraguay took advantage.

BAM!

They got what they were looking for in the 58th minute, a goal.

Almiron launched a looping cross from deep. Enciso timed his header perfectly and buried it past Olsen, ending a short but silky smooth move.

And just like that, 2-1.

But Paraguay weren't done.

In the 76th minute of the game, they finally found a way back into the game through a penalty kick.

It was VAR drama as Arzamendia's cross struck Krafth's arm. After a lengthy check, the ref pointed to the spot.

The 41-year-old veteran, Cardozo, stepped up and sent Olsen the wrong way.

2-2. Wild scenes at the BC Place in Canada.

The final moments of the game was cagey.

Sweden nearly won it in the 89th minute, a thunderous long shot by Elanga striking the bar. Kulusevski's rebound was saved point-blank by Gatito Fernandez.

Paraguay pushed one last time... but the whistle blew.

It was a draw, and with it, Sweden finished top of Group L on goal difference.

Paraguay finished last, despite never losing a match.

Miguel Almiron won the man of the match award with his game-changing assist, 5 successful dribbles, 3 key passes, and most importantly, his 100% heart.

He was the spark that turned Paraguay from passengers to predators.

Sweden's coach had a few words to say at the end of the game.

"We started strong, but let them back in. That's dangerous in knockout football. We must learn, quickly".

The Paraguayan coach also faced the media.

"We played for pride. We played for country. That second half was us. I'm proud of the boys".

Sweden survived a late scare, but questions remained about their defense.

Paraguay exited the tournament with heads held high, victims of the fine margins only the World Cup can deliver.

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After what felt like a lifetime ago since it started, Sweden vs Paraguay brought an end to the FIFA World Cup group stage.

And now that Matchday 3 is complete and all 48 nations have completed their group stage games, the tournament could finally proceed to the Knockout Stage draws using the new 2026 FIFA World Cup format.

48 teams competed in 12 groups (A to L). the top 2 from each group (24 teams) automatically qualify for the knockouts, plus the 8 best 3rd-placed teams, making a total of 32 teams for the round of 32, the first of it at the FIFA World Cup.

After the Round of 32, then the Round of 16, Quarterfinals, Semifinals, and then the Final of the FIFA World Cup.

[Qualified Teams by Group:]

[Group Winners:]

>Group A: Ghana.

>Group B: France.

>Group C: Brazil.

>Group D: Argentina.

>Group E: Nigeria.

>Group F: Spain.

>Group G: Germany.

>Group H: England.

>Group I: Netherlands.

>Group J: Portugal.

>Group K: Uruguay.

>Group L: Sweden.

[Group Runners-up:]

>Group A: Japan.

>Group B: Morocco.

>Group C: Australia.

>Group D: Norway.

>Group E: Canada.

>Group F: Italy.

>Group G: Colombia.

>Group H: USA.

>Group I: Tunisia.

>Group J: Belgium.

>Group K: Mexico.

>Group L: Czech Republic.

[Best 3rd-Placed Teams (based on points, goal difference, goals scored):]

>Ukraine (Group I).

>Egypt (Group C).

>Switzerland (Group K).

>South Korea (Group B).

>Poland (Group A).

>Chile (Group D).

>Paraguay (Group L).

>Croatia (Group E).

(Note: Some teams qualify as 3rd from the same group where a 2nd-place team also advances.)

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[Round of 32 Draw:]

1) Ghana vs Switzerland.

2) Spain vs South Korea.

3) Brazil vs Norway.

4) Argentina vs Tunisia.

5) Nigeria vs Ukraine.

6) England vs Belgium.

7) France vs Japan.

8) Portugal vs Mexico.

9) Germany vs Czech Republic.

10) Uruguay vs Canada.

11) Netherlands vs Poland.

12) USA vs Australia.

13) Sweden vs Morocco.

14) Colombia vs Italy.

15) Egypt vs Chile.

16) Croatia vs Paraguay.

Chapter 514: Round of 32; Ghana vs Switzerland

[FIFA World Cup 2026 – Round of 32:]

[Match 1: Ghana vs Switzerland]

[Venue: Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Atlanta, USA]

[Date: June 30th, 2026]

[Kick-off: 17:00 local time]

[Referee: Facundo Tello (Argentina)]

The atmosphere at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta, USA, was hot and humid at 30 degrees centigrade, a crucible for pure endurance football.

The FIFA World Cup group stage was over, and now, knockout stage football was here.

It was the moment of truth.

The stage where champions could fall, and underdogs could rise.

The stage of miracles.

Ghana, group winners with style and steel, came into this knockout fixture glowing with belief that they could write a tale to never forget at the FIFA World Cup this year.

Their young squad, vibrant and full of running, had surprised many in Group A. Theirs was one of the biggest underdog stories of the group stage.

Switzerland, scraping through as one of the best third-placed teams from Group K, were seen as the underdogs, but with Granit Xhaka and Manuel Akanji leading, they were not to be underestimated.

What followed in Atlanta was a battle of endurance, belief, and one Ghanaian star seizing his moment.

Both nations started with their best XIs.

Ghana started in a 4-2-3-1 formation, Lawrence Ati-Zigi starting in between the posts for the Africans, while a 4-man defense comprising Tariq Lamptey, Amartey, Salisu, and Gideon Mensah stood in front of the goalkeeper.

In midfield was the solid duo of Thomas Partey and Abdul Samed, while the attacking midfielders were Mohamed Kudus, Inaki Williams, and Sulemana.

Antoine led the line as the striker for the Ghanians.

As for Switzerland, starting in a 4-3-3 formation, they had Yann Sommer in between the posts, a defensive quadruple of Widmer, Akanji, Elvedi, and Ricardo Rodriguez sitting in front of him.

The midfield trio were Granit Xhaka, Freuler, and Sow, while the forward trio comprised Xerdan Shaqiri, Embolo, and Vargas.

On paper, both teams were evenly matched.

And then...

FWEEE!

The referee's whistle sounded, kicking off the game.

For the first few minutes of the game, both nations showed intent and grit as they dug in, refusing to roll over for their opponent's pressure as they fought tooth and nail to assert their dominance in the game.

Both sides fought for possession dominance, with neither side yet to dictate it when the first goal came in early in the 11th minute of the game.

Ghana struck, and it was Mohammed Kudus who broke the deadlock in the first Round of 32 game.

It started with a Partey interception in midfield. Kudus took the ball and slalomed through two defenders, burst into the box, and unleashed a thunderous low shot past Sommer.

Ghana 1-0 Switzerland.

Just like that.

BOOM!

The Mercedes-Benz erupted.

Kudus charged towards the corner flag in celebration. He pointed to the sky; Ghana were flying.

After that goal, Switzerland were forced to dig in.

They tried to steady the tempo of the game. Xhaka dropped deep to dictate play, and Shaqiri had a decent effort saved in the 25th minute. But Ghana's midfield intensity kept forcing errors.

Ghana were beginning to assert dominance in the game.

And once again, they struck. It came in the 37th minute, and Kamaldeen Sulemana, the left winger was the star of the show.

From the left wing, Sulemana took on Widmer, beat him for pace, and curled a gorgeous finish into the far corner.

Yann Sommer was rooted to one spot. Ghana roared.

2-0.

The crowd was singing. The drums never stopped.

The first half came to an end with Ghana leading 2-0.

In the second half, Murat Yakin, Switzerland's coach made two changes, bringing on Okafor and Ndoye. And Switzerland did start brighter.

They brought fire and energy with them in the second half, and it paid dividends after 10 minutes of intense gameplay.

56th minute, GOAL!

Shaqiri's deep free kick was headed on by Xhaka, and Embolo pounced on a rebound after Ati-Zigi spilled the ball.

Breel Embolo, the Switzerland striker set Swiss fans in the Mercedes-Benz Stadium on fire.

2-1.

The Swiss believed again.

For 20 minutes, it was all Switzerland, as they went on wave after wave of marauding attacks down the wing and through the middle.

Ghana were holding on.

The atmosphere in the stadium was tense, electric.

Akanji had a header cleared off the line. Shaqiri skimmed the post from a tight angle. And amid the chaos, finally came Ghana's answer.

"INAKI WILLIAMS...!!!" The commentator screamed.

In the 78th minute, and on the counter, Kudus slipped through a beautiful ball. Inaki Williams burst past Elvedi and chipped Sommer with a sensational first-time lob.

3-1. Game over.

The Mercedes-Benz exploded in Ghanaian euphoria.

[FULL-TIME: Ghana 3-1 Switzerland]

With that result, Ghana advanced to the Round of 16 of the FIFA World Cup for the first time since 2010.

Switzerland were sent home; beaten, but not broken.

At least, they had a goal to show for their efforts.

Ghana's Mohammed Kudus won the man of the match award with his 1 goal, 1 assist, 5 successful dribbles, and 3 chances created.

According to the commentator...

"He was everywhere. The heartbeat, the spark, the rhythm of Ghanaian dominance".

And once again, Ghana added another page to their underdog script in this World Cup. After such a ruthless performance at the Mercedes-Benz, off course, their coach had a few words for the media.

"They doubted us. Now they see us. This is the spirit of Accra, Kumasi, Tamale... this is Ghana".

Granit Xhaka, the Switzerland captain also had a few words for the media.

"We pushed hard, but they were better in key moments. Full respect to Ghana".

Ghana's win over Switzerland briefly dominated the internet.

BBC also covered it:

"This was not just a win, this was a statement. Ghana are not passengers in this World Cup. They are drivers".

Ghana progressed to the Round of 16, where they would face the winner of Match 15, Egypt or Chile.

The reason why Ghana's win briefly dominated the internet was because another FIFA World Cup epic loomed... Spain vs South Korea.

Chapter 515: Round of 32; Spain vs South Korea

[FIFA World Cup 2026 – Round of 32:]

[Match 2: Spain vs South Korea]

[Venue: Levi's Stadium, Santa Clara, California, USA]

[Date: June 30th, 2026]

[Kick-off: 20:00 local time]

[Referee: Daniele Orsato (Italy)]

There were over 68,000 fans in attendance at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara.

The weather was stable at 18 degrees centigrade, accentuated by a cool evening breeze, perfect for high-octane football.

This wasn't just a game. This was a cultural clash of tempo and defiance.

Spain, having topped Group F with two commanding wins and a draw, entered with swagger. South Korea, one of the last third-placed teams to qualify, were here to prove that underdogs could bite hard.

From the first minute, this was a rollercoaster, a brilliant tactical battle and a show of elite-level finishing.

And in the middle of it all? Lamine Yamal. The 19 year old prodigy delivered a performance for the ages at the Round of 32.

Both nations started with their best lineups.

Luis de la Fuente started his Spanish side in their regular 4-3-3 formation, Unai Simon in goal, while ahead of him was a solid defensive quadruple of Dani Carvajal, Robin Le Normand, Dean Huijsen, and Alejandro Balde.

In midfield was the power trio of Rodri, Pedri, and Fabian Ruiz.

In attack was Lamine Yamal in left wing, Nico Williams in right wing, and Mikel Oyarzabal leading the line as the striker.

As for South Korea, they started in a 4-2-3-1 formation with Kim Seung-gyu starting in between the posts, with a defensive quadruple of Kim Tae-hwan, Kim Min-jae, Jung Seung-hun, and Lee Ki-je starting ahead of him.

In midfield was the duo of Hwang In-beom and Park Yong-woo, while the attacking midfielders were Lee Kang-in, Son Heung-min, and Hwan Hee-chan.

Cho Gue-sung led the line for the South Koreans as the striker.

FWEEE!

The game started and from the first minute, Spain dictated possession.

South Korea came to Levi's Stadium with grand ambitions for an upset. Hours earlier at the Mercedes-Benz, Ghana managed to accomplish their grand ambitions against Switzerland.

This Spain side was a whole other ball game, but still... a nation could dream. And so, South Korea dreamed.

But reality was quite different from what the South Koreans expected.

For the first 10 minutes of the game, Spain was imperious, hoarding possession, as they dominated with a 75% possession rate.

Despite the Spanish domination, South Korea were compact and dangerous on the break, for a while... till it came crumbling down.

BZZZ!

15 minutes, GOAL!

Lamine Yamal, the boy wonder set the stadium aflame in the 15th minute of the game, breaking the deadlock after early Spain pressure.

From a Pedri backheel at the edge of the box, Yamal cut inside from the right, skipped past one defender, and curled an unstoppable shot into the top left.

Spain 1-0 South Korea.

South Korea was humbled.

Tensions flared.

Pushed to the wall, pride and qualification on the line, the South Korean fans set aside logic and simply roared on their team.

Spain dominated still, but it felt like a mantra rang in the stadium.

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

The South Korean players dug in. They kept on running, chasing the ball, chasing ghosts, and then...

BAM!

Instant response.

When it felt like Spain's momentum could not be stopped, against the run of play, South Korea hit back with a blistering counter.

Lee Kang-in released Son on the left, who rolled back the years with a vintage run, danced around Carvajal and drilled a low finish under Simon.

The Korean fans went wild as the stadium erupted.

Son slid in celebration, setting the stadium ablaze.

The game continued and Spain kept pressing, but Korea's midfield held firm, until another burst of brilliance.

Bam!

Another Spanish bullet went in through Oyarzabal in the 39th minute.

A deep cross from Balde found Oyarzabal, who outjumped Kim Min-jae and powered a header home.

2-1.

Spain led again before the break.

The first half came to an end 2-1.

The second half could be defined in a single sentence: The red wave vs the wall.

Korea made early changes, bringing on Jeong Woo-yeong and Kim Young-gwon. The Taeguk Warriors upped the tempo.

And then in the 54th minute, South Korea caused an internet meltdown.

From a recycled corner, Hwang Hee-chan blasted a volley into the top right.

BOOM!

The net rippled. The bench exploded.

2-2.

The drama was building to a crescendo.

The whole world expected Spain to blow South Korea out of the water, not this... definitely not a 2-2 draw by this point of the game.

Spain was under the pressure cooker, but Yamal was not done.

After 2-2, the South Koreans were infused with energy, and momentum. They ran themselves to the ground, keeping Spain's fearsome attack at bay.

But then...

In the 68th minute of the game, Lamine Yamal erupted again.

BZZZ!

Receiving the ball in a tight space near the right corner of the box, Yamal nutmegged his marker, then lasered a low shot through three bodies and into the bottom corner.

3-2.

A moment of magic!

BOOM!

The stadium exploded even as Yamal ran to the corner flag, celebrating wildly with a big smile on his face.

South Korea were behind. And once again, they were under pressure, and forced to do the impossible to save their World Cup bid.

They tried, but...

FWEEE!

Penalty to Spain in the 76th minute.

Foul on Nico Williams by Lee Ki-je. The referee checked with VAR, and his decision was supported. The penalty stood.

Oyarzabal stepped up to take the penalty.

In the 77th minute, Mikel Oyarzabal of Spain sent the goalkeeper the wrong way, burying it with cold precision into the corner of the net.

4-2.

Korea looked crushed.

But stubborn and defiant, they refused to die.

In the 90th plus 1 minute, a fierce header off a Lee Kang-in corner went in.

4-3.

Too little, too late for South Korea. But they were full of heart.

FWEEE!

The referee's whistle made millions of Spanish fans around the world heave a sigh of relief.

'Motherf*cking Koreans!'

[FULL-TIME: Spain 4-3 South Korea]

It was an unforgettable battle.

South Korea went home as heroes. Spain? They went through, obviously shaken, but shining.

Lamine Yamal won the man of the match award for his 2 goals, 1 pre-assist, 6 take-ons completed, and 4 chances created.

Like the commentator said.

"A teenager playing like a king. This World Cup may be his stage after all".

In tears, Son Heung-min faced the media.

"We gave everything. I couldn't be prouder. They'll remember Korea".

Luis de la Fuente, the Spain head coach also had a few words.

"We were tested like never before. But this group knows how to suffer, and how to win".

Chapter 516: Round of 32; Brazil vs Norway

[FULL-TIME: Spain 4-3 South Korea]

After the thriller at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California, USA, the next day, on the first day of July, it was finally time for another of the tournament favorites to take to the pitch for their first knockout stage game... Brazil.

[FIFA World Cup 2026 – Round of 32]

[Match 3: Brazil vs Norway]

[Venue: AT&T Stadium, Arlington, Texas, USA]

[Date: July 1st, 2026]

[Kick-off: 17:00 local time]

[Referee: Michael Oliver (England)]

The AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas was sold out, with over 82,000 fans in the stadium, turning it into a cauldron of noise.

The weather was dry at 33 degrees centigrade, Texas heat meeting Scandinavian cold steel.

The game forecast looked bright.

This one was marked long before kickoff. On paper, Brazil were the favorites; five-time champions, Group C winners, and boasting a deadly front line.

But Norway? They had Erling Haaland, Martin Odegaard, and the fearlessness of a team with nothing to lose and everything to prove.

Brazil was not just the favorite on paper, they were one of the favorites of the tournament, but Norway was a country that already proved their credentials this World Cup, and showed glimpses of exploding to become the biggest underdog story of the World Cup.

If Spain vs South Korea was a thriller, this was a game of Samba meeting a Viking Storm.

The question was a conundrum? Was it supposed to be whether Brazil could survive the Viking Siege, or if Norway could survive Brazil's Samba?

Only time could tell.

Brazil started in a 4-2-3-1 formation with Liverpool's Alisson Becker in goal, while standing in front of him was a quadruple defense of Danilo, Marquinhos, Eder Militao, and Wendell.

In midfield was the duo of Bruno Guimaraes and Joao Gomes, while in attack was Rodrygo in right wing, Raphinha down the middle as the attacking midfielder, Vinicius Junior on the left, and Endrick through the middle as the striker.

Neymar suffered a knock in Brazil's final group stage game, and so he was rested for this game.

As for Norway, they started in a 4-3-3, Nyland in goal, while ahead of him was a defensive quadruple of Ryerson, Ajer, Hanche-Olsen, and Bjorkan.

In midfield was the trio of Odegaard, Berge, and Thorsby, while in attack was Alexander Sorloth on the right, Erling Haaland leading through the middle as the striker, and Nusa in left wing.

FWEEE!

The game started.

What followed was one of the grittiest, most exhilarating matches of the tournament so far.

Brazil started with flair and tempo, Rodrygo and Vinicius Jnr. combining with frightening pace down the flanks.

Norway, deep and disciplined, were waiting for a moment to strike.

But then, BOOM!

Brazil struck early before the Norwegians could truly settle into the game.

It came in the 9th minute through a moment of individual brilliance from the Real Madrid mainstay, Vinicius Jnr.

A slick one-two between Raphinha and Rodrygo found Vini inside the box. The Real Madrid star faked one, cut inside, and rifled it into the top near post.

Brazil 1-0 Norway.

BOOM!

The yellow wall erupted.

Brazilian fans around the stadium went wild, celebrating, beating drums, even as they lit up the night with a loud noise.

After that goal, it was all Brazil, their Samba terrorizing the Norwegians all over the pitch. Norway barely held on, but then, against the run of play, Norway struck like true Vikings in the 29th minute.

Out of nothing, Odegaard lofted a ball between the center backs. Haaland bullied Militao off it and slammed a volley past Alisson, setting the stadium ablaze.

1-1.

Viking thunder in Texas!

Having been quiet for majority of this game, the fans of the Norwegian Viking charge erupted, making their presence known in the stadium.

After that equalizer, the momentum didn't swing in Norway's direction yet as Brazil kept on dominating the game.

Norway held on, but they could not hold on forever.

In the 42nd minute, Endrick struck.

A chaotic corner saw Norway half-clear. Bruno Guimaraes recycled the ball, chipped into the six-yard box, and somehow, the tiny Endrick found a way to leap to nod home.

2-1 Brazil!

Norway was shocked.

A dramatic end to the first half.

The second half was a battle of nerves.

Norway pressed higher. Odegaard began pulling strings. The Brazilian defense creaked under pressure.

And then in the 56th minute, the Vikings of Norway did it again.

This time, it was Alexander Sorloth.

A low cross from Nusa zipped through the box. Sorloth got ahead of Danilo and smashed it in at the near post.

2-2. Game on!

Brazil made changes. Neymar came in for Endrick, turning Brazil into a dynamic team without a natural striker. Carlo Ancelotti was back at it, bringing his Real Madrid voodoo to the national stage.

Casemiro also came on and added steel to the Brazilian team. The crowd sensed tension, and then...

BAM!

Yes, it was the aging magician, Neymar Jnr.

Neymar rolled back the years with another vintage World Cup goal.

It was an instinctive shot in the 71st minute, a rebound off a Raphina shot that he roofed from close range.

3-2. Brazil back in front.

Norway pushed for a third equalizer, throwing bodies forward.

And then... Erling haaland struck in the 89th minute.

BAM!

But it only hit the crossbar.

Just a minute later, a looping header from a Ryerson cross clipped the bar and bounced inches in front of the line. The bar to the rescue again.

So close. Yet so far for Norway.

[FULL-TIME: Brazil 3-2 Norway]

After South Korea, this time, it was Norway's turn as they put up a valiant fight against the favorites before bowing out.

They fell with honor. Brazil marched on; shaken but sharpened.

Vinicius Jnr. won the man of the match award with his 1 goal, 1 assist, 4 successful dribbles, and 3 fouls won. It was a vintage performance.

When the heat was rising, he danced through the fire.

Ancelotti faced the media, and like a don, he said:

"We bent, but we didn't break. That's World Cup mentality".

Chapter 517: Round of 32; Argentina vs Tunisia

[FIFA World Cup 2026 – Round of 32]

[Match 4: Argentina vs Tunisia]

[Venue: SoFi Stadium, Los Angeles, USA]

[Date: July 1st, 2026]

[Kick-off: 20:00 local time]

[Referee: Jesus Valenzuela (Venezuela)]

The SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles, USA was not just booked up and filled to the brim, it was an overflow crowd, heavily pro-Argentina.

It was the 2 G.O.A.T's last run at the FIFA World Cup.

Messi and Ronaldo had competed at this epic stage of football for 6 times. Messi had touched heaven, Ronaldo was yet to do the same, but their fans still trooped to the World Cup in droves to watch them play the last time.

In the group stage, it was a bit mild, but since it was the knockouts now, Messi fans came out in droves to support their G.O.A.T.

It was perfect weather conditions in Los Angeles, mild and cool indoors.

Lionel Messi returned to the starting XI, and Argentina meant business.

The headlines wrote themselves before the game: Lionel Messi, rested against Norway, returns to the starting lineup for the first knockout match.

Tunisia, coming off a miraculous escape from Group I, carried pride and resilience, but Argentina carried destiny.

And from the opening whistle, it was clear: La Albiceleste weren't here to play, they were here to dominate.

Argentina started in a 4-3-3 formation with Emiliano Martinez in goal, while the defensive quadruple comprised Nahuel Molina, Christian Romero, Nicolas Otamendi, and Marcus Acuna.

In midfield was the trio of Enzo Fernandez, Rodrigo De Paul, and Mac Allister, while the attacking trio led by Lionel Messi, the Argentine captain in left wing was completed by Lautaro Martinez through the middle, and Julian Alvarez on the right.

As for Tunisia, they started in a 4-1-4-1 with Bechir Ben Said in goal, and a defensive quadruple of Drager, Talbi, Meriah, and Abdi ahead of them.

Laidouni was the sole holding midfielder, while ahead of him as the creators were Skhiri, Mejbri, Sliti, and Kechrida, while Jaziri led the line as the striker.

FWEEE!

The first half started, and Argentina turned on the magic.

Argentina pressed high, stealing the ball, dominating possession, and playing with imperious superiority, and they got their goal early, as early as the 8th minute from their ageless captain, Lionel Messi.

A foul on Julian Alvarez gave Argentina a free kick at 24 yards out.

Messi stood over it... and curled it perfectly into the top left corner.

1-0 Argentina.

BOOM!

The stadium exploded. The perfect script.

The crowd erupted. Phones flashed. The stadium roared in unison, "MEESSI!"

It was pure euphoria from the fans in blue and white.

But Tunisia were given very little time to catch their breaths when Argentina struck again in the 23rd minute of the game, this time through Lautaro Martinez.

Messi again was the architect, this time, slicing a through ball between Talbi and Meriah to cut open Tunisia's defense.

Lautaro took one touch and blasted it past Ben Said.

2-0. Argentina were suffocating Tunisia.

Tunisia barely crossed midfield. Argentina confirmed them to half-field. Their only chance came in the 33rd minute, a speculative long shot from Sliti that Dibu Martinez handled calmly.

Their misery soon became worse as Julian Alvarez also added his name to the scoresheet on the 41st minute.

It came from a sweeping counterattack. Mac Allister to De Paul, De Paul to Messi, Messi to Julian Alvarez.

One touch. One shot. One net-buster.

3-0 Argentina.

It was beautiful. It was brutal. It was inevitable.

The first half came to an end all Argentina.

During halftime, of course, the Tunisian coach did his bit to motivate his players, giving them hope that the game was not lost yet.

Well, it was false hope.

The second half started, and it was control, class, and a bit of chaos.

Tunisia tried to regroup, bringing on Msakni and Ghandri to stabilize midfield. They showed more aggression... but Argentina were in full control.

And yet, in the 56th minute, Tunisia bought themselves a lifeline.

It came from a rare moment. Tunisia pressed high, won the ball near Argentina's box. Naim Sliti shifted onto his left and curled a shot that took a deflection off Otamendi and beat Dibu Martinez.

3-1. A flicker of hope?

No. Hope extinguished, simply because Lionel Messi was not done yet.

In the 68th minute of the game, the Argentine G.O.A.T struck again.

Enzo Fernandez picked out Messi in the half-space. One trademark feint, one defender left sinning, and a laser-guided finish inside the near post.

4-1.

Another international goal to the collection. A wink to the crowd, a nod to history.

Lionel Messi whirled away in celebration as his teammates swarmed him.

Lionel Scaloni subbed him off to a standing ovation in the 76th minute. Julian Alvarez and Lautaro followed soon after. Argentina coasted home.

[FULL-TIME: Argentina 4-1 Tunisia]

The defending champions sent a message. They were still very much in the game, and running for champions a 2nd time in 8 years.

Messi dazzled.

Tunisia departed the tournament humbled but proud.

And of course, Messi won the man of the match award with a vintage performance comprising 2 goals, 1 assist, 7 key passes, and a stunning 93% pass accuracy all game despite being with the ball for majority of the game.

Like the commentator said:

"There are artists, and then there is the one who taught them all. This was a footballing masterclass".

Messi played, Messi performed, so of course the post-match reactions were going to be crazy.

There was an internet meltdown immediately after the game.

On the pitch, Messi faced the media.

"We respect Tunisia. They earned their place here. But tonight, we wanted to show what we're made of".

Jalel Kadri, the Tunisian coach also had a few words for the media.

"We lost to greatness tonight. It was an honor to share the pitch with Lionel Messi".

ESPN Commentary also waxed lyrical about Messi.

"You can prepare for Argentina, but you can't prepare for this Messi".

With that win, Argentina moved on to the Round of 16.

Chapter 518: Round of 32; Nigeria vs Ukraine

[FIFA World Cup 2026 – Round of 32]

[Match 5: Nigeria vs Ukraine]

[Venue: Allegiant Stadium, Las Vegas, USA]

[Date: July 2nd, 2026]

[Kick-off: 17:00 local time]

[Referee: Wilton Sampaio (Brazil)]

Over 68,000 fans, tens of thousands of Nigerians in green and white filled the Allegiant Stadium on the evening.

The atmosphere in the stadium was electric; a dry pitch, tense air, the right conditions for perfect drama.

Las Vegas hadn't seen a show like this in years.

Nigeria, group winners for the first time in modern World Cup history, had captured the imagination of the world with their electric football and fearless starby: Samuel Moses, or as the fans called him... SAM.

Like the pundits said:

"It's been decades since we last saw a Nigerian squad this fearsome".

"This Nigerian squad had always been filled with talent, with the likes of Victor Osimhen, Viktor Boniface, Alex Iwobi, Calvin Bassey, Ademola Lookman, and the likes plying their trade for them, but it was with the addition of Sam that this team truly exploded".

"Sam was the missing link that they needed to form an all-conquering team".

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Sam's moment".

"This is his stage".

"This is Sam's Nigeria".

"Jay Jay Okocha? Kanu Nwankwo? Well, in just a single year of unmatched brilliance, Sam is already carving a legacy that's almost about rivalling these Nigerian footballing legends".

"He's already won the AFCON trophy".

"He singlehandedly dragged Nigeria to World Cup qualification, when it seemed like all hope was over".

"He singlehandedly dragged them to top spot in a World Cup group for the first time in what feels like forever".

"Sam is the ONE!"

"Watch him, admire him, respect him".

With all the hype surrounding fans after his legendary season with Barcelona to what Nigeria already did in the World Cup so far, the atmosphere in the stadium was electric and filled with tension between both nations.

Nigeria clearly had the media on their side, but Ukraine?

They came into the game sharp, focused, and with one plan: stop the boy who couldn't be stopped.

The only question was... could they do it?

Only time would tell.

Both nations started with their best starting XI.

Nigeria started in their regular 4-2-3-1 with Stanley Nwabali in goal, while ahead of him was a defensive quadruple of Ola Aina, William Troost Ekong, Samuel Ajayi, and Zaidu Sanusi.

In midfield was the duo of Wilfried Ndidi and Frank Onyeka, while the creators in chief for the night were Samuel Chukwueze down the right, Sam down the middle, and Ademola Lookman on the right.

Victor Osimhen played through the middle as the striker.

As for Ukraine, starting in a 4-3-3 formation, they had Anatolii Trubin in goal, with a defensive quadruple of Tymchyk, Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, and Mykolenko ahead of him.

In midfield was the trio of Stepanenko, Malinovskiy, and Sudakov, while in attack was the trio of Mykhailo Mydryk, Dovbyk, and Yarmolenko.

FWEEE!

The referee's whistle sounded, and the game started.

The first half was a cagey affair.

From the first touch, Ukraine made their intentions clear: Sam was not to breathe.

Having watched and seen what Sam could do with a ball at his feet in this tournament, the last things the Ukrainians wanted was to give him an inch, and so they set aside a man to man-mark him, tightly.

Stepanenko was glued to him like a shadow, and anytime Sam got on the ball, three yellow shirts would collapse on him.

With so many people on him and so much interference to his game, Sam couldn't breathe. He was suffocated.

His first touch? Heavy. His second? Hacked.

By the 10th minute, he'd already been fouled three times.

And then, it started...

In the 21st minute, Ukraine exploded on a lightning break from the left. Mudryk left Aina for dead and rifled a shot just inches wide. Warning signs.

Just 8 minutes later, in the 29th minute of the game, Osimhen also threatened for Nigeria, coming close to getting the opener.

Chukwueze danced down the right and whipped in a devilish cross. Osimhen rose highest; his header thundered off the bar.

The game turned heated by the minute as both nations played end to end football, leaving it all on the pitch.

All the while, Sam was hassled and forced into a physical duel all game.

Frustrated, in the 41st minute of the first half, Sam went in late on Malinovskyi, and he was booked. A yellow crowd.

Sam groaned.

The crowd murmured. Nigeria's diamond was being ground down.

The first half came to an end 0-0.

Tense, taut, and tactical.

Ukraine's plan was working. Sam had touched the ball just 17 times in 45 minutes, a career low.

During halftime, Eric Chell had a few words for his players.

Sam? His frustration was bubbling into motivation, a devilish head and voice rearing its way in his head once again.

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

The voice was back.

The second half started, and the tension rose.

Nigeria began to open up as they dug in.

Lookman tucked inside, Ndidì pushed higher. Sam? He began to drift; left, deep, false nine, he was everywhere, trying to break the leash.

In the 54th minute, the fans rose to their feet.

SAVE!

Yarmokenlo fired a low drive from the top of the box. Stanley Nwabali came to the rescue, going on a full stretch to deny.

In the 62nd minute, Sam hit the crossbar!

For the first time, he found space. A one-two with Osimhen, and then, like a demon, he erupted.

He curled one from 25 yards out, only for it to ping off the crossbar.

So close.

The crowd gasped.

"F*CKKKKKKK!" Sam screamed, frustrated.

In the 75th minute, Ukraine switched to a 5-4-1.

Having accepted their inability to break Nigeria's defense down, they were playing for penalties now. The wall was set, the door locked.

Extra time seemed inevitable now. Both sides were even.

But then, in the 89th minute...

Zaidu Sanusi burst down the left, whipping a desperate, high cross into the penalty area.

Osimhen challenged, but the ball looped high... too far... too deep... drifting...

Until Sam appeared... like lightning in the air.

BICYCLE KICK.

Mid-air pirouette. Time slowed. His back to goal, both feet off the ground.

His right boot connected clean.

BAM!

The ball lashed through the air like a missile. Trubin didn't move. It hit the net like a shot from heaven.

GOAL!

Nigeria 1-0 Ukraine.

The world exploded!

BOOM!

The crowd leapt. Nigerian fans cried.

The camera zoomed in: Sam wasn't celebrating wildly. He just stood there, arms outstretched, staring at the sky.

Cold.

He had broken the cage. In the 89th minute of Nigeria's toughest game in the tournament so far, their first knockout game, he wrote his name in World Cup lore.

[FULL-TIME: Nigeria 1-0 Ukraine]

Nigeria went through.

Ukraine fell to their knees; brave, brilliant, but out.

And of course, Sam won the man of the match award with his incredible game winning goal, his 4 chances created, 9 fouls drawn, and 2 yellow cards earned from opponents.

According to the commentators:

"He was hunted. Pressed. Tripled. And still, he rose".

It was one of the toughest games of his career, and still, he did it, he found a way to shine.

Chapter 519: Round of 32; England vs Belgium

On the same day that Sam wrote his name in World Cup lore against Ukraine in the Round of 32 clash, England also took on Belgium.

Their game was scheduled to start 3 hours later.

[FIFA World Cup 2026 – Round of 32]

[Match 6: England vs Belgium]

[Venue: MetLife Stadium, New Jersey, USA]

[Date: July 2nd, 2026]

[Kick-off: 20:00 local time]

[Referee: Clement Turpin (France)]

The weather in New Jersey was nice. Clear skies. It was an electric night in East Rutherford.

England vs Belgium, one of the fantasy scenarios of the Round of 32.

It was a heavyweight war of eras... England's new blood vs Belgium's golden farewell.

This was no ordinary Round of 32 match, it was a clash of legacy and prophecy.

Belgium's golden generation; De Bruyne, Lukaku, Tielemans, Doku, those remaining of it knew this was their last dance.

England, young and star-studded, looked like the future. Jude Bellingham, Bukayo Saka, Cole Palmer had set the tournament alight.

The stage was massive. The match? Even bigger.

England started in a 4-2-3-1 formation under Thomas Tuchel, with Jordan Pickford in goal, and a defensive quadruple of Kyle Walker, John Stones, Marc Guehi, and Luke Shaw ahead of him.

In midfield was the duo of Declan Rice and Bellingham, while the attacking creators were Saka on the right, Cole Palmer down the middle, and Marcus Rashford on the left.

Down the middle was England's captain and striker, Harry Kane.

Belgium? They started in their regular 3-4-2-1, with Thibaut Courtois starting again in goal, while ahead of him was the defensive trio of Faes, Vertonghen, and Theate.

In midfield was the trio of Castagne, Onana, Tielemans, and Carrasco. De Bruyne and Jeremy Doku lined up as the creators in chief.

As for Lukaka? Of course, he led the line as the striker.

The first half was a game of back and forth like thunderclaps.

Both teams went at each other with no caution, no brakes.

Belgium and England had a lot of history over the years already, mostly in the World Cup and in other international football competitions.

It was not exactly a rivalry between both countries, but on this stage, both sides wanted to crush their opponents and use them as stepping stones to progress to the Round of 16 of the tournament.

And so, they played their hearts out on the pitch, running themselves to the ground as they fought to assert dominance over the game.

And then...

BAM!

Romelu Lukaku struck for Belgium. He struck early.

In the 12th minute of the game, Doku tore down the left wing, beat Kyle Walker, and squared it for Lukaku who rifled it past Pickford.

Kyle Walker may have started revitalizing his career with AC Milan, but he was no longer that Walker that bombed up and down with imperious dominance during his Manchester City years.

England 0-1 Belgium.

England went behind in the 12th minute, but the response was swift.

England got their equalizer just 7 minutes later in the 19th minute of the game through a Jude Bellingham stunner.

Rashford drew two defenders wide, and slipped it to Bellingham, who dropped Belgium's Youri Tielemans with a fake and curled it into the far corner.

It was vintage Bellingham.

"BELLIGOAL!!!"

"BELLIGOAL!!!"

"BELLIGOAL...!!!" The commentators screamed.

1-1.

The roar shook the stadium.

England got their equalizer, and yet, they were not satisfied. Not yet.

The 3 Lions took it a step further as they finally got their lead in the 28th minute of the game. Harry Kane finally got his name on the scoresheet.

Cole Palmer found space between the lines, floated a delicious cross behind Faes, and Kane met it on the volley.

BAM!

The goalkeeper saw a ghost.

2-1 England. Just like that.

Pure class from Harry Kane. But Belgium didn't blink.

11 minutes after England took the lead, the Belgians got themselves back in the game, and it was their own captain... Kevin De Bruyne.

He hadn't had a sniff, but then... boom!

From 30 yards out, a thunderbolt off the bar and in.

2-2.

"KEVIN DE BRUYNE...!!!" The commentator screamed in a shrill voice.

Kevin De Bruyne whirled off away in celebration, bringing the stadium down with him as Belgian fans roared at the top of their lungs.

The first half was pure madness.

It came to an end 2-2.

The second half was chaos on the wings.

It started, and for a time, the game settled slightly. But individual brilliance kept the chaos alive.

In the 56th minute of the game, Doku came close, as he cut inside and curled. It was just wide. Pickford was comfortably beaten.

Belgium was growing.

In the 67th minute, another Harry Kane save!

One-on-one with Casteels after a Rashford flick, Casteels saved with his face, Belgium surviving as their goalkeeper kept them in it.

In the 74th minute, England made a sub, bringing in Eberechi Eze for Palmer. Thomas Tuchel wanted energy.

The game continued, tough, tight, and intense.

And then, the moment.

It came in the 84th minute of the game.

Jude Bellingham won a foul 25 yards out. Saka stood over the ball.

Everyone expected a cross, but instead, a cheeky reverse ball into space set Bellingham up as the Real Madrid man sprinted onto it, and cut it across goal...

It was meant for Harry Kane, but Kane let it run.

Behind him?

Bukayo Saka. Calm, measured.

He took one touch. That was all it took...

A tap in.

GOALLLLLLLLLLLLLLL!!!

3-2 England.

For a brief moment, the MetLife came undone as English fans in the stadium turned it into a cauldron of noise with their energetic celebrations.

After that, Belgium pushed desperately.

De Bruyne hit the post in the 90th plus 3 minute. Youri Tielemans had a volley blocked by Declan Rice in the 94th minute.

Belgium tried everything in their playbook, and yet, it was not enough.

And then...

FWEEEE!

The game came to an end.

[FULL-TIME: England 3-2 Belgium]

England survived.

Belgium bowed out; their last hurrah, and a fittingly epic one.

Jude Bellingham won the man of the match award with his 1 goal, 1 assist, 10 duels won, and 3 key passes.

He was not the future anymore. He was the now, England's general in midfield, the face of this England side.

The post-match reactions were touching as an emotional Kevin De Bruyne faced the media.

"We gave everything. Maybe we just ran out of time... and legs".

Bellingham also had some words for the media.

"I live for moments like this. This team isn't afraid of anyone".

Thomas Tuchel, the England coach also had a few words.

"They challenged us. But we answered. That's tournament football".

Chapter 520: Round of 32; France vs Japan

England vs Belgium was a thriller, one of the best games of the 2026 FIFA World Cup tournament so far.

But the next day, the tournament continued, and it was the turn of another tournament favorite... France.

[FIFA World Cup 2026 – Round of 32]

[Match 7: France vs Japan]

[Venue: NRG Stadium, Houston, Texas, USA]

[Date: July 3rd, 2026]

[Kick-off: 17:00 local time]

[Referee: Fernando Guerrero (Mexico)]

The weather at the NRG Stadium in Houston, Texas was humid and heated, both in climate and in emotion.

It was dubbed the Brave Blossoms vs the Blue Juggernaut: A Tale of Daring Resistance.

The question was, did Japan actually have what it takes to write a tale of a daring resistance?

No one gave Japan a chance.

Facing the reigning World Cup finalists and arguably the most talent-rich squad in the world, Japan entered the stadium with humility, but also with a quiet flame of fervor and ambition.

France, led by the unstoppable Kylian Mbappe were tournament favourites.

But for 90 minutes in Houston, Japan refused to bow.

France started in a 4-2-3-1, Mike Maignan in goal, while ahead of him was a defensive quadruple of Jules Kounde, William Saliba, Dayot Upamecano, and Theo Hernandez.

In midfield was the duo of Aurelien Tchouameni and Adrien Rabiot.

The attack comprised Ousmane Dembele down the right, Michael Olise down the middle as the attacking midfielder, Desire Doue on the left as the left winger, and Kylian Mbappe leading the line as the striker.

In contrast, Japan started in a 4-3-3 formation with Daniel Schmidt in goal, while ahead of him was a defensive quadruple of Sugawara, Itakura, Tomiyasu, and Nagatomo.

In midfield was the trio of Tanaka, Morita, and Kamada, while in attack was the dynamic trio of Doan, Asano, and Kubo.

It was a fearsome Japanese side.

But in front of the French national football team, they looked like a lion cub shrieking in front of a roaring adult Lion.

FWEEE!

The game started.

The atmosphere was electric as French fans sang at the top of their lungs, dwarfing the little Japanese voices in the stadium.

They were literally bullying the Japanese fans.

The game began with the usual French control, feeding the ego and euphoria of their fans... but then, the first jolt.

BAM!

GOAL! Japan, from Ritsu Doan.

It all started from a turnover by Rabiot in midfield.

Tanaka slipped it wide, and Doan cut inside with the ball, curling a beauty past Mike Maignan's fingertips.

France 0-1 Japan.

Just like that.

The stadium gasped.

It took a few seconds for the Japanese fans to respond and realize what just happened, and when they did, the stadium exploded.

BOOM!

It was all Japanese for a few unforgettable seconds.

But then, France responded with power. Kylian Mbappe began to shift gears, leading the French side, and pumping them on to unleash their true potential.

Then...

BAM!

They struck.

21st minute, Kylian Mbappe.

He cut through three defenders like paper, then smashed it into the roof of the net in ruthless fashion.

1-1. A King's answer.

But Japan wouldn't fold.

In the 39th minute of the game, they came close, Kubo unleashing a low shot from the edge of the box that stung Maignan's palms.

France were being tested. Loudly.

The knockouts always had this energy that came with them, and tonight was not any different for the French.

The first half came to an end 1-1.

The second half soon started, the tide and the crack.

France turned up the tempo. Michael Olise dropped deep, Hernandez overlapped constantly, and Mbappe began demanding everything.

And then, in the 52nd minute of the game, France finally found the lead they've been seeking all game.

BAM!

Desire Doue struck for the French.

Olise fed him with a no-look pass. The winger's finish was clinical, low and across goal, leaving the goalkeeper no chance.

2-1 France.

And yet, France's lead didn't last.

Japan struck back in the 59th minute of the game, and it was Takefusa Kubo who did it with an incredible shot from range.

Kamada intercepted Tchouameni, ran 30 yards, and slid Kudo in. The winger went near post.

2-2! Spot# an e\$^r.o!r? V.is&it the ori!g\$ina%l p#o#s&t\$ on M\$V+LEM\$P^Y.R@.

BOOM!

The stadium exploded, Japanese fans finding their voice again.

Japan had equalized again.

The French coach sent on Marcus Thuram and Coman. It was time to press the hammer down.

And then, Kylian Mbappe struck again, this time in the 71st minute.

Coman to Olise, and Olise chipped the ball to the back post, where Mbappe lurked. Mbappe leapt, hovered, and headed it across goal and in.

3-2 France.

That was the dagger.

In the final minutes of the game, the Japanese players wore their hearts on their sleeves, playing with passion and exuberant energy.

Japan poured forward. Maignan saved from Asano in the 88th minute. Doan hit the side netting in the 92nd minute.

They threw everything they had to get the equalizer.

But France held. Just barely.

[FULL-TIME: France 3-2 Japan]

It was a magnificent effort from the Blue Samurai, but France's brilliance, and Mbappe's stardust proved too much.

Without debate, Kylian Mbappe won the man of the match award with his 2 goals, 1 assist, 5 dribbles, and 4 shots on target.

The commentators raved by the end of the game:

"He's not just fast. He's not just technical. He's inevitable, like a hurricane".

The post-match reactions to the game were crazy. Like other games of the Round of 32, Japan came close to pulling the underdog clutch moment, but they just fell short at the last moment.

Mbappe had a few words for the media at the end of the game.

"Respect to Japan. They gave us hell, we just didn't see it coming. But we're France. We know how to survive hell".

Hajime Moriyasu, the Japanese coach also faced the media at the end of the game to say his piece.

"We pushed giants to the edge. I'm proud. This is not defeat, it's a beginning".

And of course, the French coach also had a few words.

"That was a war. But wars are won by moments. And we had Mbappe".

France moved on to the Round of 16.