

ELEVEN PARAGRAPHS WORLD CUP BRACKET

This team of paragraphs, who knows its identity, keeps to its trusty 4-4-2 and offers all the honest, important and exciting words from the play downs at World Cup 2022. The goalie begins with an introduction to the tournament's concluding eight games, but only hints at what will be uncovered in the pages ahead. The back four passes around ideas from four excellent quarter-finals. Four midfielders combine and provide insight, story and facts from the semi-finals. One attacking midfielder presses forward to discuss the third place game. Up front, two strikers gracefully and clinically cover the World Cup Final, which was one heaven of a game, filled with just about everything. From the bench, another paragraph arrives late and finishes with a fine tournament summary.



FIFA WORLD CUP
Qatar2022



WORLD CUP 2022

ONE - The last eight matches matched the quality, intensity, intrigue and beauty of all the matches that preceded it - and then some. Ten goals were scored in the quarter-finals. Two matches required extra time and penalties. From start to finish in all matches, nobody knew for sure who was going to win until the very very end. The final four included nations from Europe and South America and another from a region never seen before at this stage. Both semi-finals were finely contested, but the winners were known with a quarter hour to go (give or take). Both victors claimed clean sheets, underlining and proving the old adage defence wins championships. The third place game was a lively, open affair, culminating in a medal-worthy winning goal. The World Cup Final was played by the competition's two best teams and was watched worldwide by an audience of billions. The game itself was the crowning jewel in an already sparkling world cup crown. It is an instant classic with twists and turns, aches and pains, chills and thrills and then finally one poetic and righteous ending.





THE QUARTER-FINALS

TWO - NETHERLANDS vs ARGENTINA was the mouth watering encounter it was expected to be. Two fine nations keeping each other honest on this quest for our planet's best nation - or more aptly put, the best of the best. In this elite eight matchup, played at the Iconic Stadium, Argentina played its best game of the tournament... again. They gained an early foothold, saw out a late exhilarating, debilitating Dutch storm and then used extra time to collect wits and again settle nerves, before winning on penalties. The Argentine goals were well timed and paced and showed the world that this team now means business. The Netherlands showed great courage and made changes with conviction, including bringing on Wout Weghorst and starting to whip balls into the box. The gallant striker pounced on one of the vicious crosses and halved the lead on 83 minutes. And, in the last second of added time, Weghorst struck again from a beautifully planned and executed "new" free kick that started in prime shooting range. Standing right next to the wall, WW was rolled a pass, turned sharply and slotted home to equalize in stunning fashion. Both goals were so unexpected and amazing that it gave us all some of those indelible soccer moments we live for. It was cruel on Argentina, who played so very well for eight ninths of the ninety minutes, but it was awesome for the Dutch and great for the neutrals, who got 30 minutes of dessert after such a great meal of a game. The extra time allowed time for the Albicelestes to acclimate to its new goal, which was to win a penalty shoot-out. And that is exactly what they did. Shoot-out stopping specialist Emi Martinez stood up and saved the first two penalties, paving the way for a 4-3 victory, thanks to successful penalties from Messi, Paredes, Montiel and lastly Lataro Martinez. Holland grudgingly go home, but can be proud of their excursions in Qatar. Argentina march on the the final four.

THREE - BRAZIL vs CROATIA was more than just a battle of skill and talent, it was a battle of wills and desires and of tactics and patience. If you wanted a heavy weight battle, the Education City Stadium in Doha was the place to be for this enthralling quarter-final match. Winning a world cup is rare and special and the winners deserve our individual and collective attention and respect. The happenings in this match between these two sets of men demonstrated just how hard it is to win a world cup match, let only the tournament. We know the physical and mental demands are immense, as is the emotional drain, especially at a world cup. But also, these players and teams must also handle all the societal expectations and national pressures or is it all the societal pressures and national expectations. It's one or the other or both. Also, if you care to believe it, players must also cope with the ancestral spirits and ghosts and all the archetypal constraints and karma that pull and push each moment of every game. For Brazil and Croatia, all of these factors meshed perfectly into one beautiful tug-of-war that could not find a winner after a scoreless ninety minutes. After thirty more minutes, parity was maintained, but only after two incredible moments - one devilishly delicious and the other literally lucky. The Brazilian goal was scored by the mercurial Neymar, who floated like a butterfly through everyone and then after rounding the keeper, stung like a bee. The goal seemingly set Brazil on its way to the semi-final, but was rubbed out by an unbelievable equalizing goal from Croatia, a nation that just never knows it is beaten and hardly ever is. Substitute Bruno Petkovic stood up to be counted and sent a scuffed shot goal bound, that grabbed some luck by deflected off a hardworking defender before nestling into the Brazilian net. Brazil were gutted as was more than half the world who just love to watch the yellow shirts of Brazil. This quarter-final was eventually settled through penalties and Croatia's shooters went 4 from 4 for a 4-2 win. The favourite of the favourites is dead, while Croatia fly toward another world cup medal.



FOUR - PORTUGAL vs MOROCCO was a real treat. Portugal flew out of the blocks, looking confident and bright. Early action favoured the Europeans, however Morocco began with the same resolve and belief they had against Spain. They were visibly ready for the onslaught of pressure that was sure to arrive. Whilst defending was central to the Moroccan game plan, it quickly became clear that the Moroccans were also ready to play some football when they got the ball. It was interesting to see defender after defender dribbling clear out of the back, sprinting away from Portuguese pressure, seemingly without a care in the world. Like gazelles, they dribbled beautifully, leading midfielders up the field and into enemy territory. On one of these flowing moves in the 42nd minute, the Moroccans looked much like the Galacticos or the Blaugrana, weaving and patterning space down the left flank, where a driven cross was met by an in-form striker named Youssef En-Nesyri, who headed home the game's first and ultimately only goal. Try upon try would Portugal, who fell right into the same booby trap as Croatia, Belgium and Spain had done. Only Canada had breached this stingy Moroccan rearguard. Portugal, with all its rookies and its veterans and all that incredible talent in between, could not find a goal, could not find the goal to keep them in the tournament. They were a sexy dark horse pick as European champs with talent galore, but they would not find a goal, sending home Portugal and Ronaldo (again without a world cup). As with the game, Morocco get the last word here as well - the Atlas Lions make history as the first nation from the African continent to advance to the semi-finals.

FIVE - ENGLAND vs FRANCE lived up to the hype in so many ways. It is so great to watch a football match where both teams want to get forward and score goals, where neither team wants a scoreless draw, where neither team wants penalties. These two powerful teams came to play today and both teams came to win. When searching out the winning team, folks talking in the terraces like to see who settles first. The answer today was France, but soon after so did England. The Three Lions were mounting a real offensive, taking the game to the champions. During one of these forays forward, a clear foul on Bukayo Saka

was missed by a wayward referee, resulting in a swift and effective French counter attack that ended in the game's first goal. It was very harsh on England, but was a worthy strike from 23 yards into the bottom left corner. Into the second half, England played with desperation, but also control and began an earnest search for an equalizer. Five ten minutes into the second half Saka, who was a menace to France all night, dribbled clear into the box and was fouled - PENALTY. Harry Kane took charge and ripped one across his body into side netting to bring the teams level. The game ebbed and flowed with some of the best players in the world putting on a clinic of skill, movement and cooperation, time and time again. This great football was met with great defending at every turn, until. After a wee run of English pressure, which included excellent football, but *no telling cross*, France expertly sprung forward with seven minutes to go and found Antoine Griezmann who sent in *the perfect cross* for Olivier Giroud to head home with power and precision to give France a golden goal. With ten minutes to go, England went again searching for a life-saving equalizer. Substitutes were willing and capable and the coaches played all their cards. Suddenly, a searching ball looking for Mason Mount forced a defender to knock the Englishman over in the box resulting (after VAR) in another English penalty. This time, Harry Kane could not deliver, sending his shot flying over the crossbar into the river of disappointment... utter disappointment. England went down (some may say) as the better team, but did go down and out of the tournament. Les Champs will more than take it and certainly deserve this victory having played another solid ninety minutes of football and finding a way to come up trumps when it mattered most. Les Blues keep up its recent dominance over the the Three Lions and look forward to its date with Morocco (and perhaps 90 minutes later) with destiny.





THE SEMI-FINALS

SIX - SEMI-FINAL PREVIEW Argentina vs Croatia pits a two time winner with the reigning silver medalists. These two nations have played 5 times, winning two each and tying one. In World Cup 1998, Argentina won 1-0. In 2014, Croatia beat Argentina 3-0 on route to the final. Morocco and France have played 11 times at senior level, but this will be the first time at a World Cup. France are favourites, but Morocco may be the better bet.



SEVEN - CROATIA vs ARGENTINA was played at the Iconic Stadium in Lusail and featured two of the most iconic players of the past two decades - Lionel Messi and Luca Modric. Sports writers and columnists worldwide produced articles upon articles about these two men and what they have meant to their nations and to the world of football. Both men were rightfully lifted onto pedestals and while both deserve a place in the final, it was magical Messi's day with Argentina running out 3-0 winners. Messi started the scoring, expertly dispatching a penalty in the 34th minute. Five minutes later, Julian Alvarez, who drew that penalty, went on to score himself to double the lead. Sent away by Leo in their own half, three Argentines sprinted full tilt at the Croatia backline. Alvarez went himself, cutting back on one defender, then side stepping another, creating a fluffed clearance from this retreating, twisting panicking defender.

Alvarez then finished sweetly in front of a surprised and beaten Croatian keeper. Croatia's bag of magic tricks had run dry, but their will, belief and history kept the match interesting. In the end, Argentina remained steadfast and true, repelling Croatia at every turn, whilst accumulating precious possession throughout. With 20 minutes to go, Leo Messi, who has turned back the clock throughout the tournament, showed the world yet again why he is the best soccer player of all time. He streaked down the right, the ball glued to his foot, used his patented stop and go multiple times, including with a final shimmy and snake around one tough defender, whom he made look like a boy. To top it off, Messi nutmeg passed another defender, teeing the ball up for Julian Alvarez, who couldn't miss from six yards giving Argentina a third goal. In the end, it was a comprehensive victory for Argentina, who are doing what tournament champions do - getting better with each game. Croatia still dreams of bronze, while Argentina fly into the Sunday's final, searching for gold.



EIGHT - MOROCCO vs FRANCE was played at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor and turned out to be a truly watchable game featuring one of the giants of World football versus the underdog team of the tournament. Crazy thing is, for long spells, it was difficult to know who was who. Morocco played as much the part of builders and creators of fine football, while France displayed defending defiance and determination. However, when the dust settled, there was no mistaking the blue shirts of the champions, who showed the world (and anyone else in the universe who may eventually, eons from now, catch the stream) how to win and keep winning football matches. The match itself was an excellent duel between two very worthy nations. Morocco, a patched up group that lost its skipper early, yet soldiered on, brought so much to this semi-final. They arrived to this semi-final on stout and heroic defending, but demonstrated in this match incredible skill and ability moving forward. It was by necessity, as

France blasted into an early lead thanks to Antoine Greizmann (who was seemingly everywhere), Kylian Mbappe (who is always so scary for defenders) and the opening goalscorer Theo Hernandez, who jumped forward and slotted home in the 5th minute. Morocco had work to do and used excellent teamwork to build up and move forward, even carving out real chances from time to time. France were as tough ever, also getting forward and looking for ways to score another. Where attrition was Morocco's friend throughout the tournament, it became its eventual undoing as the strong French bench finished off their African counterparts. The game was already close to gone, when a second French goal arrived in the 79th minute to confirm the winner was France. A limping Mbappe dribbled wonderfully into the box, before skidding a shot in the direction of substitute Randal Kolo Muani, who used his first World Cup knock-out touch to make it 2-0 and seal France's place in the World Cup Final. The current French squad shows us that we can still survive and thrive even amidst our deficiencies. This team shows us how to play just well enough to find victory, even amidst dark and scary patches along the way. This French team continues to stand up and be counted - amongst the best of the tournament, for sure, but also, they are a game away from reaching dynasty status as one of the greatest teams of all time.





THE THIRD PLACE GAME

NINE - MOROCCO vs CROATIA was a really fun game to watch. It started with a bang as the teams traded early set piece goals. Croatia scored first with an inventive free kick that landed wider to Ivan Perisic who popped the ball back square into the danger area, where his big centre half could lunge at the ball and head into the top left corner. Morocco's response required a free kick that had some service, a random flick and a goal scorer in the right place, at the right time, sticking to the fundamentals and heading down and into the net from close range. It remained a pretty even game throughout, except for one thing - Croatia scored the game's only other goal right before the half. Some shoddy clearing was punished, with Croatia players cueing up for a telling shot, which floated just right for Mislav Orsic, who bent and floated a shot off the goalie's fingertips that bounced off the post and into the net. That goal stood up as the winner on a day of celebration for both nations, who leave Qatar smiling ear to ear. The bronze medal means something, it really does, especially for Croatia, who have three medals in six trips - pretty impressive.





THE WORLD CUP FINAL



TEN - ARGENTINA vs FRANCE - Argentina versus France is pure skill versus pure ability, pure passion versus pure intelligence, pure potions versus pure magic. Put this all together and you get one of the greatest games ever, perhaps *the greatest game*. Argentina started the brighter and took the match to the champs. Proper rewards arrived in the 23rd and 36th minutes, giving the South Americans a 2-0 lead. For the first goal, Angel De Maria, who was smartly found on the left wing, dribbled well into the box and was tripped resulting in a penalty. Leo Messi coolly stroked home the opening goal. De Maria scored the second, after yet another blistering counter attack. In his own end, Messi used a deft curved touch that preceded two quick passes from Alvarez and Mac Allister that move ball seventy yards where it found De Maria in the box with time and space to skillfully beat Hugo Loris and double the lead. Into the second half, Argentina kept France at bay, until the last ninth or tenth of the game, right up until the game's substitutions changed the match. The tide slowly turned to the French, who with 10 minutes remaining found two quick fire goals 97 seconds apart. Kylian Mbappe scored the first from the penalty spot and the second right after with a timely and clinical volley. Ecstatic France seemed likely to find a winner against the stunned Argentines, but Argentina held out courageously for extra time. What a ninety minutes and thank God for thirty more.



ELEVEN - EXTRA TIME - Into extra time, Argentina settled back down and tried again to win a football game. France looked as strong and confident as they had all day and wanted badly to complete the comeback and secure back to back titles. All around the world, people's hearts were racing and palms were sweating with nobody knowing what would happen next. What did happen was another Leo Messi goal. The Argentines broke quickly down the right wing with quick sharp passes that sent Martinez toward goal. He blasted a shot that was saved, but the rebound fell to Leo, who was in the perfect spot to kick home the go-ahead goal. For the second time in the match, Argentina had won it - or had they? For the second time in the match, France battled back to draw level. Following a defended corner, Mbappe blasted a shot toward net that was blocked by a dangling Argentine elbow and the referee immediately pointed to the spot. Kylian (who else) scored again, completing his world cup final hat trick and his golden boot winning 6th goal. Most importantly, he tied the game 3-3 with just minutes to go. Both teams had clear chances to score again with Lataro Martinez of Argentina getting a clear header all wrong. Soon after, Kolo Muani of France was played in all alone, shot well to the near post, but was well saved by Emi Martinez, sending this incredible match to a penalty shootout. The two superstars from each team scored their nations first goals in the shootouts. Argentina's heroic keeper saved France's second and forced another off target, giving Argentina the edge. Pablo Dybala, Leandro Paredes and lastly Gonzalo Montiel all scored to give Argentina a 4-2 shootout victory. Argentina win World Cup 2022, its third. Leo Messi wins a World Cup, his first. And believe it, Leo was no passenger in this adventure, he was the driving force all tournament and again today in the final. Leo Messi cements his place as the best player to have ever played.





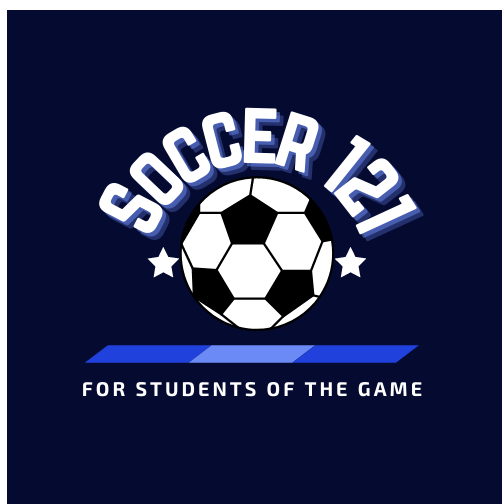
TOURNAMENT SUMMARY

TWELVE - OFF THE BENCH - The tournament started on Sunday November 20 with a comprehensive 2-0 victory for Ecuador, kicking off 13 days of amazing group stage football. In Match Day 1, England, France and Spain were easy winners, while Argentina and Germany were shock losers. Netherlands, Belgium, Brazil and Portugal also won their opening games. Match Day two matches were all intense, highlighted by Argentina's crunch must-win victory over Mexico and wins by France, Brazil and Portugal. USA were better than England, but settled for a draw. The biggest surprise was Morocco's 2-0 victory over Belgium. Only Qatar and Canada were eliminated. Match Day 3 brought the world extreme excitement as each group's last games were played simultaneously. Almost with every goal, the tables and the top two shifted or jumped from one nation to another, bringing joy and relief to some and extreme disappointment to others. Neutrals were loving every minute of it - lapping it up so to speak. We clearly need more of the same in four years time or even better. In the end, the top two teams moved on to the knock-out phase and the bottom two packed up and went home. In the group stage, 120 goals were scored.

The world was about to witness 52 more goals in the knock-out round, bringing the grand total to a record 172 goals. In the Round of 16, all but one of the group winners prevailed, including Netherlands, England, Argentina, France, Morocco, Brazil and Portugal. The only exception was Japan (Group E Winner), who lost to Croatia (Group F Runner-Up). All four quarter-final matches were interesting and watchable. Croatia and Argentina survived penalty shootouts to knock out Brazil and Holland. France beat England 2-1 in an intense encounter, while Morocco shocked the world again, beating Portugal 1-0 and advancing an African nation to the semi-finals for the first time. In highly entertaining semi-final matches, Argentina beat Croatia 3-0 and France outlasted Morocco 2-0. Croatia



claimed a second medal in as many World Cups, beating Morocco 2-1 for bronze. As for the World Cup Final, it was a game for the ages that will be remembered forever and maybe longer. Argentina, led by the little magician Leo Messi, prevailed 3-3 (4-2 on penalties) to win World Cup 2022. Leo Messi can now finally ride off into the sunset of international football as the best player the game has ever seen. Many of us knew it before this final, now the rest of the world must come on board as well. For most of the 90 minutes, Argentina were the better team and although France showed again its mettle and championship pedigree, it was the perfect poetic ending to a great tournament and to the incredible career of a living football legend, Lionel Messi... World Champion!



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