

Algeria and Tunisia clash in intriguing all-African 2021 FIFA Arab Cup final in Doha



- Both teams reached the final in dramatic circumstances with winners deep into stoppage time

A fascinating final between neighbors Tunisia and Algeria awaits us today in a special final of the Arab Cup.

It has been a wonderful tournament, with 10th Arab Cup preserving the traditions and characteristics that have long defined the competition.

Algeria ensured the final will be a historic one when they qualified for the first time by beating Qatar 2-1. Thus they set a date with Tunisia, who defeated Egypt 1-0, in the first all-African final since the establishment of the tournament.

Last-minute goals were a prominent feature in the group stages, and this continued in the dramatic semi-finals, both confrontations being decided very late with the help of friendly fire and a penalty kick.

In the first half of the match against Egypt, Tunisian coach Munther Al-Kabeer adopted a 5-4-1 formation, which enabled his team to put pressure on their opponents. Despite the setback of an injury to Yassin Meriah, it proved successful in stopping their opponents from scoring, setting the stage for that late dramatic win thanks to Egyptian captain Amr El-Solia's 95th minute own goal.

It was Egypt's first defeat in 19 games since their elimination from the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations.

How much the void left by Meriah will affect the Tunisians in the final remains to be seen. Muhammad Ali bin Ramadan will again replace him, as he did against Egypt.

Throughout the tournament Tunisia have presented a significant aerial threat from set pieces. Against Egypt, the Carthage Eagles played eight balls from free kicks into the penalty area — including the one that set up the winner. According to their coach, they should focus on repeating this in the final against Algeria.

The second semi-final between Algeria and Qatar was in danger of being overshadowed by the refereeing and VAR, which prompted the Saharawis to celebrate their win in front of the officials, who they deemed had almost cost them a win with the 19 minutes of stoppage time added at the end of the 90 minutes.

It was the second match in row that had ended in high drama for the Algerians. They had put on an excellent performance in the quarter-final against neighbors Morocco, the match providing everything we love about football and ending with a tense penalty shootout.

The semi-final against Qatar proved even more dramatic, with the hosts equalizing in the sixth minute of stoppage time and Algeria's winner, incredibly, coming in the 17th minute.

The final is an intriguing one between two nations with a long history in continental competitions and World Cup qualifiers. Their last match was a friendly in June which Algeria won 2-1. Their previous match was another friendly in 2019, which Algeria also won. Tunisia's last victory in this fixture came at the 2017 African Nations.

Algeria have a formidable squad full of players of high quality and physical prowess. As pointed out by coach Majid Bougherra, his players have endured difficult matches and played more minutes than any other team. He stressed the difficulty of playing six matches in 17 days with a team made up mostly of home players and missing some Europe-based players such as Manchester City's Riyad Mahrez.

I was particularly drawn to the performances of veteran Algerian goalkeeper Rais Mbolhi, especially in the semi-final win, while for Tunisia Mohamed Drager, who plays for Nottingham Forest, has stood out in the three matches he has taken part in.

At the start, the 2021 FIFA Arab Cup looked like a dress rehearsal for Qatar 2022, with many teams treating it as warm-up for continental tournaments and World Cup qualifiers in the coming months.

But with every match, culminating in those two semi-finals, it has proved itself a competition worthy of its name. On Saturday evening, we await another titanic battle between Algeria and Tunisia.
