

Arab stars have a shot at immortality as they head into Africa Cup of Nations



- Former greats will inspire today's generation as a record seven Arab nations take part in delayed edition of the competition

The Africa Cup of Nations is finally here, and after delays, disruptions and false rumors of cancelations, fans can finally settle down and watch some of the world's best players face off over the next three weeks.

The profile of African players, especially those who play abroad, has never been higher, yet there is something about the competition that ensures even the most prominent of global stars end up attaining legendary status in their home countries with a successful continental showing.

The AFCON has often proved the perfect stage to showcase players to the world.

Arab teams have won the competition 12 times: Seven by Egypt, two by Algeria, with Morocco, Tunisia and Sudan weighing in with one each.

For today's star Arab players, the feats of footballing predecessors will act as an inspiration.

Egypt, with seven title wins, remain in a league of their own in this competition, and the current generation of players will have big shoes to fill, with their predecessors having provided some of the competition's most iconic teams and moments.

In the 1998 edition, Hossam Hassan lead Egypt to their fourth title, scoring seven goals on the way to glory in Burkina Faso.

Hassan has contributed to three of the Egypt's seven titles, having been part of the squad that took the championship in 1986 at home and then crowning his international career with the AFCON 2006, also in Cairo.

Under the leadership of Hassan Shehata, it was Egypt's fifth title and marked Hassan as the only player to win the competition 20 years apart.

Then there is Mohamed Aboutrika, who lead the Pharaohs to title wins in 2006 and 2008, when he scored the winning goal in the final against Cameroon.

It is arguable that Mohamed Salah has already overtaken all his countrymen to become Egypt's — even the Arab world's — greatest-ever player, thanks to his exploits with Liverpool in recent years.

Still, an AFCON eludes him, and putting that right could be one of the crowning moments of his astonishing career.

For Algerian legends, you cannot look past Rabah Madjer and Lakhdar Belloumi, who both scored and starred in their nation's greatest win — the 2-1 victory over mighty West Germany at the 1982 World Cup in Spain.

Both ended up on 28 goals for Algeria as well, but it is their 1986 World Cup teammate Djamel Menad who scored four goals on the way to winning the 1990 AFCON title with a 1-0 win over Nigeria.

Riyad Mahrez was standout player of the 2019 edition, leading Algeria to a second title with a 1-0 win over Senegal in Cairo.

Now a single goal separates him from becoming the historical top scorer for his country in the tournament, and Belloumi's record of six goals could well go in Cameroon.

Led by Hatem Trabelsi, Tunisia won their only AFCON title after beating Morocco 2-1 in 2004 on home soil. Trabelsi remains one of the most prominent players to have represented the Carthage Eagles, having excelled for Ajax Amsterdam, Manchester City and Al-Hilal in Riyadh.

If Tunisia's current captain, Youssef Msakni, recovers from a positive COVID-19 test, he will lead his nation in an impressive seventh personal participation in the competition.

Moroccan hero Ahmed Firas, meanwhile, holds the rare distinction of taking part in his country's lone AFCON triumph in 1976, as well as being their historical top scorer in the competition with six goals.

Today, Morocco's star man is Paris Saint-Germain right-back Achraf Hakimi, who at only 23 has had a hugely successful career in Europe playing for Real Madrid, Borussia Dortmund and Inter Milan before his move to the French capital.

Alongside Salah and Mahrez, he is one of the most recognizable African players in the world today and could end up being one of the stars of the tournament.

This edition of the Africa Cup of Nations will see a record seven Arab nations take part: Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Sudan, Mauritania and Comoros.

For one, or more, of their star player, immortality awaits.