

Early days of 2021 FIFA Arab Cup highlight intrigue on and off the pitch



- As 16 Arab nations battle it out on the pitch, FIFA's resident and other officials are in Qatar for the 2022 World Cup dress rehearsal, with readiness of stadiums and new offside technology on the agenda

Just a few days into the 2021 Arab Cup in Qatar, there are already several intriguing talking points emerging, both on and off the pitch.

An emotional opening ceremony, the first round performances, young players to keep an eye on, and the new technology under the watchful eye of FIFA's leadership.

The organizers attempted to showcase the cultures of the 16 participating Arab nations at an opening party that lasted for 30 minutes in front of a large crowd at Al-Bayt Stadium.

It was a worthy start for this 10th edition of the tournament, and for the first time since its launch in Lebanon in 1963, it is under the FIFA umbrella. And for the first time ever, it comes as a replacement for the FIFA Confederations Cup, that traditionally precedes the World Cup by a year.

That this Arab Cup is a dress rehearsal for the 2022 World Cup was given even more weight by the presence of FIFA President Gianni Infantino and other major sports leaders in the stands.

And the officials are not there for merely ceremonial reasons, but to also make sure all is going to plan, from checking the readiness of the stadiums to keeping a watchful eye on the new VAR technology for offside that is under testing with view to being implemented officially at the World Cup next year.

The matches are taking place at six of the eight stadiums that will be used at the World Cup.

The showpiece opening between Qatar and Bahrain was held in front of 60,000 spectators at Al-Bayt Stadium, and the tournament is being played across Al-Janoub Stadium, Ras Abu Aboud Stadium (974 Stadium), Al-Thumama Stadium, Ahmed Bin Ali Stadium, and Education City Stadium, and Al-Ebdaa Stadium.

The new VAR addition, the so-called semi-automated offside technology based on artificial intelligence, tracks the players' movements, giving signals on 29 points in their bodies at 50 times every second; this is picked up in the control room, then sent to the on-field official who will give his decision, as was explained by the chairman of the FIFA Referees Committee, Pierluigi Collina.

The technology has already been tested behind closed doors at the Etihad Stadium in Manchester and the Allianz Arena in Munich.

This particular improvement to the VAR system — which aims to have speedier decisions with higher accuracy — is to be welcomed, as matches continue to suffer from lengthy, confusing offside cases.

The 16 teams are made up of 10 Arab nations from the Asian continent and six from Africa, and it's the latter that caught the eye in the first round with victories for Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco.

Meanwhile, Jordan's 1-0 victory over a youthful Saudi Arabian team was particularly impressive, Iraq equalized in the 98th minute against Oman, hosts Qatar beat Bahrain, and the UAE overcame Syria.

With World Cup qualification still a priority for several teams, some have decided to compete with squads made up of home-based players only, such as Egypt, or even with a second string, such as Saudi Arabia.

Herve Renard's focus is firmly on Qatar 2022, and the Saudi national team was chosen from players born after 1999. In the circumstances, they performed well against Jordan despite the eventual defeat.

With assistant Laurent Bonadei leading the team, Renard watched from the stands as the senior players took a well-earned rest and the younger ones — many of whom played in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games — staked a claim for the remainder of the World Cup qualifiers.

This reminded me of what Renard did with the Moroccan national team in the African Cup of Nations in 2018. They went on to lift the trophy.

Of particular interest to Renard will be the Al-Ahli goalkeeper Mohammed Al-Rubaie, Al-Shabab leftback Moteb Al-Harbi, highly rated Al-Hilal forward Abdullah Al-Hamdan and the brilliant Al-Fateh striker Firas Al-Buraikan.

On the other hand, Carlos Queiroz's Egypt team have been criticized for their lacklustre performance against Lebanon, though they played without Mohamed Salah or Mohamed Elneny.

With the start of the second round, things are starting to take shape.

Qatar's late, late 2-1 win over the luckless Omanis leaves them top of Group A with six points while their opponents sit in third with just one. Meanwhile, Iraq and Bahrain — who drew 0-0 — are second and fourth respectively.

In Group B, the UAE's 1-0 win over Mauritania took them to the top of the standings with maximum points from two matches, three points ahead of second-placed Syria, who recorded an impressive 2-0 win over Tunisia.

It's too early to draw conclusions from the early stages of the 2021 Arab Cup, but the second round of matches in the group stages are slowly giving an indication of which teams will challenge for the title.

For the fans, as much as the watching FIFA officials, there is much at stake in the coming days.
