

Qatar 2022 matchups not short on intriguing historical narratives



- Whether it's Ghana seeking revenge over Uruguay, Senegal hoping to repeat 2002 heroics, politically charged encounters, World Cup groups stage promise plenty of intrigue already

RIYADH: As the dust settles over the 2022 World Cup draw in Doha, and coaches start preparing dossiers on their opponents for the action in seven months, narratives are emerging.

Qatar is the first host to participate in the World Cup for the first time, but it will not be playing a part in the tournament's opener, that honor going to the Netherlands and Senegal on Nov. 21.

The omens bode well for Senegal. In 2002, they kicked off the World Cup in Japan and South Korea with a stunning 1-0 win over then defending champions France. And 22 years earlier, Cameroon pulled off an identical feat at Italia 90 by

beating Diego Maradona's Argentina by the same score.

In Group H, the scent of revenge will be in the air.

Few supporters from Ghana, or around the world, will have forgotten Luis Suarez's 120th-minute goal-line handball, and subsequent penalty miss by Asamoah Gyan, that denied the African nation a place in the semi-finals of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.

Even less would have forgiven the controversial Uruguayan star for his celebrations following his red card and his country's win in a penalty shootout.

Expect fireworks when the two teams, including Suarez, step onto the pitch at Al-Janoub Stadium on Dec. 2.

Uruguay, for their part, have previously faced all three other teams in Group H, beating South Korea 2-1 in 2010, and in 2018 overcoming Portugal 2-1 in the round of 16.

Group B is in danger of narrative overload.

England, the US, and Iran will be joined by the winner of a European play-off (Wales, Scotland, or Ukraine).

This will be the third World Cup meeting between England and the US, with the Americans still unbeaten against the nation that exported the game to the world.

Famously, the US beat England in Belo Horizonte, Brazil at the 1950 World Cup, and drew 1-1 against Fabio Cappello's team in 2010.

Meanwhile, Nov. 29 will see the second meeting between the US and Iran, the Asian powerhouses having won a politically charged clash 2-1 at the 1998 World Cup in France.

Should Scotland or Wales reach the finals, no doubt talk will center around a Battle of Britain, and the Ukrainian team will garner an immense, sympathetic spotlight — and a lot of neutral supporters — if they make it to Qatar following the ongoing invasion by Russia.

Qatar 2022 does not seem to have a clear Group of Death though Group E with Spain, Germany, Japan, and the winner of the CONCACAF-OFC play-off comes close.

Spain and Germany will meet on Nov. 27 at Al-Bayt Stadium, arguably the group-stage match with the highest profiles and indeed the only one between two previous World Cup winners.

The confrontation will also bring back memories of the November 2020 meeting in the UEFA Nations League, in which Spain thrashed Die Mannschaft 6-0.

Defending champions France will have mixed feelings at meeting Denmark yet again in the group stages, where the two European nations will be joined by Tunisia and the winner of the CONMEBOL- AFC play-off (Peru, the UAE, or Australia) in Group D.

In 1998 and 2018, group meetings between the two preceded a French World Cup triumph. However, in 2002, a 2-0 win for Denmark confirmed a dismal early exit for the world and European champions.

On an individual level, eyes will turn to recent history's two finest footballers, surely taking part in their last World Cup.

Cristiano Ronaldo will look to prove the doubters wrong by pulling one last rabbit out of the hat in Group H against Ghana, Uruguay, and South Korea.

Lionel Messi, having finally led Argentina to the Copa America title in 2021, will look to crown his astonishing career with a World Cup win, emulating his nation's finest son Maradona.

Against Poland, Messi will come up against the brilliant Robert Lewandowski, the man many believe has been denied a rightful Ballon d'Or by the Argentine maestro in recent years.

And Saudi Arabia's players will no doubt relish coming up against arguably the world's greatest footballer.

Will we see a new champion at Qatar 2022? Or will it follow expectations with a win for one of the traditional powers? And could it follow the pattern of the last three World Cups with group-stage elimination for the title holders?

Whatever happens, we will not be short on narrative.
