

World Cup 2022

QUARTERFINALS PREVIEW

Not Just Happy to Be Here. They're Here to Win.

DOHA, Qatar — And then there were eight. In a little more than two weeks, the World Cup has whittled its field from 32 hopefuls to eight genuine contenders, most of whom would regard anything less than the ultimate success as something of a failure.

Not all of them, of course. Morocco, the standard-bearer for both Africa and the Arab world, has made the quarterfinals for the first time. It will not go lightly now, but anything

else, from this point on, will be a welcome bonus. A rational analysis would suggest this may be Croatia's limit, too.

All of the others, though, were never here for the atmosphere. They are in Qatar for glory. England and France have a depth of resources none of the other teams can match. Portugal wants to deliver a final triumph for Cristiano Ronaldo, even if he is not starting. Louis van Gaal,

FRIDAY'S MATCHES

CROATIA
BRAZIL

10 a.m. Eastern TV: Fox, Telemundo

There is no sight more ominous than that of Brazil having fun. Its last three World Cup campaigns, at least, have been long months of angst and tension and inevitable heartache. In Qatar, Neymar, Vinicius Júnior and the rest of Tite's team are light-footed, spring-heeled and all the more menacing for it.

On paper, Brazil has been given a helping hand by the kindness of the draw, too. It qualified so comfortably that it could afford to lose its final group game — for which Tite had made a raft of changes — and its round-of-16 meeting with South Korea was such a mismatch that Weverton, the third-choice goalkeeper, played the final 10 minutes. In the quarterfinals, Brazil will be expected to make short work of an aging Croatia.

The thing about Croatia, though, is that it is good at this. In Luka Modric, Mateo Kovacic and Marcelo Brozovic, Croatia possesses a midfield of rare balance. Four years ago, the core of this group showed it knew how to negotiate knockout soccer well enough to reach a World Cup final. Brazil will rightly be favored, but it should not expect the matchup to be fun.

NETHERLANDS
ARGENTINA

2 p.m. Eastern TV: Fox, Telemundo

There are two ways of reading Argentina's campaign in Qatar. One, infected by that early but ultimately inconsequential defeat to Saudi Arabia, is that this is a team on a permanent knife-edge, oscillating wildly from despair to triumph and back again, one that will tire not just physically but emotionally in its desperation to deliver a World Cup to Lionel Messi.

The other, somewhat kinder, interpretation is that Argentina's coach, Lionel Scaloni, has slowly crafted his team into one capable of being a genuine force in the tournament. He has drafted Enzo Fernández into midfield, adding a little dynamism; he has switched out the toothless Lautaro Martínez up front for the more energetic Julián Álvarez. Against Australia, Argentina looked far more poised than it had against the Saudis only 10 days earlier.

Now, it faces a reprise of one of the World Cup's classic quarterfinals — Argentina lost to the Dutch at this stage in Marseille in 1998, a game illuminated by a wonderful winning goal from Dennis Bergkamp — and one of its great rivalries. Argentina beat the Dutch in the 1978 final, lost to them in 1998, then beat them again in the 2014 semifinals. Argentina has felt, for much of this tournament, like a team playing for history. The problem with that is that it depends on whose history you are reading.

SATURDAY'S MATCHES

MOROCCO
PORTUGAL

10 a.m. Eastern TV: Fox, Telemundo

For the better part of a decade, Portugal has been something of a contradiction. The country has for years boasted enough individual talent to match any team on the planet and yet, under the aegis of Fernando Santos, it has been assiduously, unapologetically, and in many ways successfully dour, as if a group of the finest artists in the world had been gathered together and asked to wallpaper a bedroom.

That all changed on Tuesday evening, thanks (seemingly) to the biggest call of the tournament: Santos relegated Cristiano Ronaldo, a national icon and one of the two best players of his generation, to the bench, and cut Portugal loose. Gonçalo Ramos, his direct replacement, scored a hat-trick in a 6-1 rout of the Swiss, and Otávio and João Félix thrived in a more dynamic system.

Morocco, then, presents a test both of Santos's resolve — does Ronaldo remain in reserve? — and Portugal's newfound sense of adventure. The first North African or Arab country to make it this far in a World Cup has played four games in Qatar. In front of its raucous, fervid support, swollen by the backing of much of the rest of the region, it has yet to concede a single goal off an opponent's foot, even in a penalty shootout. Its approach to Portugal will be the same as in its victory against the Spanish: sit tight, stay back, and pounce on the break.

FRANCE
ENGLAND

2 p.m. Eastern TV: Fox, Telemundo

France, the reigning champion, has sailed through this tournament with a sort of airy inevitability: breezily scoring four after seeing its pride pricked by Australia, comfortably beating Denmark, losing to Tunisia because it seemed funny, and then expertly dispatching Poland in the first knockout round.

Such serene progress bodes well, particularly given that — by the time the group stage ended — France had lost so many players to injury that Didier Deschamps, its coach, had grown so weary of trying to replace them that he simply stopped. It seemed a risk at the time, but it turns out that the absence of Paul Pogba, N'Golo Kanté, Karim Benzema and the rest is but a minor inconvenience when you still have Kylian Mbappé.

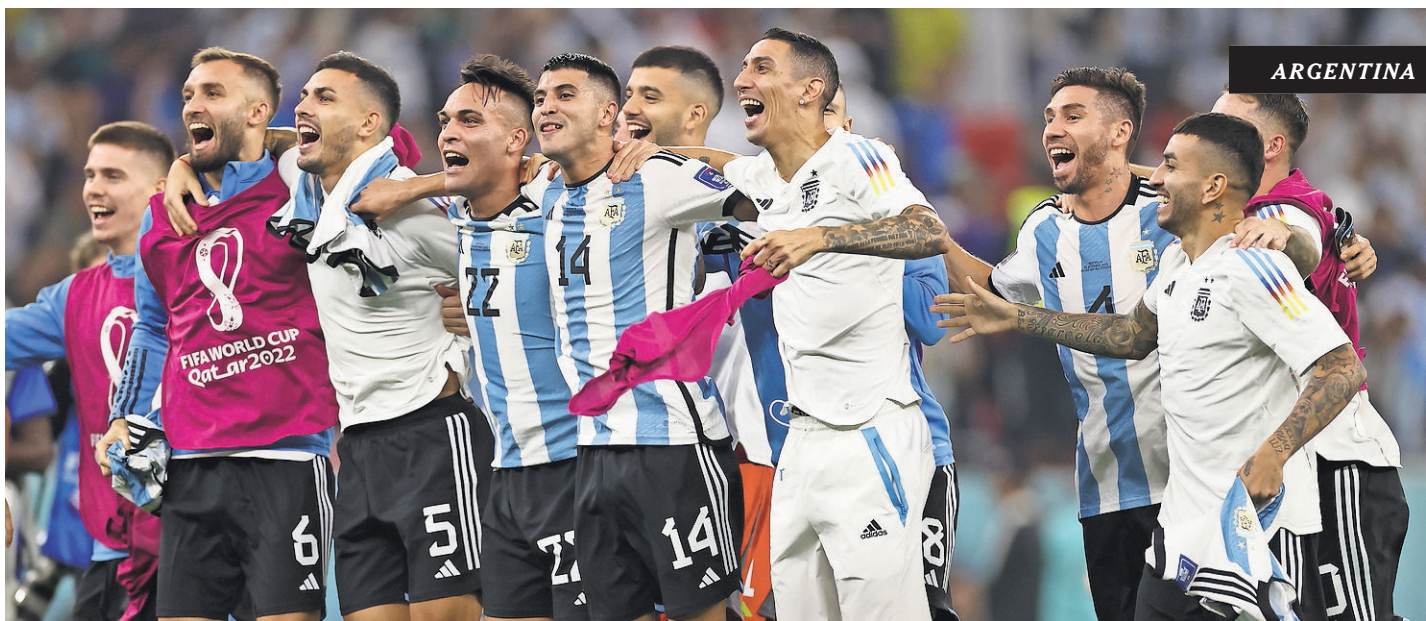
That said, England will present a far stiffer challenge than anything the French have faced thus far. No team has scored more goals than Gareth Southgate's side — like Portugal, it has mustered 12 in four games — and, in Jude Bellingham, England possesses one of the breakout stars of the tournament. After reaching the semifinals in 2018 and the European Championship final in 2021, England looks like a team ready to take the next step.



the Dutch coach, has repeatedly said that playing soccer is pointless if you're not trying to win.

And then there are the twin South American giants: Brazil, probably the most impressive side in the tournament so far, the scent of a sixth World Cup in its nostrils; and Argentina, inspired by and devoted to Lionel Messi, determined that it should be here that his career reaches its climax. RORY SMITH

Qatar



A Visit to the One Place
Where the Booze Flows
(Just Not Very Freely)

By ANDREW KEH

DOHA, Qatar — The questions spilled out almost as soon as the car doors closed. Was it crowded? How was the selection? And what about the prices?

The taxi driver, who went by Shaj, then peered into the rearview mirror and politely asked to see my receipt. I passed it forward, and he scanned it up and down as we swayed through traffic.

Shaj had picked me up along a side street on the southern fringes of Doha, inside the razor-wire-topped walls of the Qatar Distribution Company. The Q.D.C., as it is widely known, is the sole importer and distributor of alcohol in Qatar, a Muslim country where the sale and consumption of booze is heavily regulated. Cocktails, wine and beer are served at a smattering of luxury hotels in the country, but the Q.D.C.'s two branches are the only places that sell alcohol for home consumption.

"It's probably one of the happiest places in Doha," said Rachel Morris, who is originally from Australia but has lived in Qatar for 15 years.

The Q.D.C. has stood for years as a colorful example of a broader, delicate dance within Qatari society that predated the World Cup: The country's effort to balance its conservative values — including, in this case, a religion that forbids alcohol consumption — with its desire to open itself to the world. That line between tradition and accommodation rarely seems fixed in place.

"Everyone is welcome to come to Qatar," Hassan al-Thawadi, the head of the World Cup's local organizing committee, said in an interview during the long run up to the tournament. "What we ask is that when people come, just respect that we're a relatively conservative nation."

For international residents looking for a taste of home, then, the Q.D.C. offers a boozy lifeline. Access to the store is granted through a state-run application process. The privilege was extended in recent weeks to teams, sponsors and news media organizations here for the World Cup. (Fans were not allowed to apply.)

On a visit one recent morning, three employees of the United States national soccer team were pushing around three shopping carts piled high with bottles and cases of beer — and wondering aloud if they should grab a fourth.

They were presented with an international selection of drink options: aperitifs from France, sake from Japan, wines from Chile and Australia, beers from Mexico, Brazil and the Philippines. There was even a separate room stuffed with freezers and devoted entirely to pork products, which are otherwise unavailable in restaurants and grocery stores around the country: frozen pepperoni pizzas and shrink-wrapped pork chops, cans of Spam and cocktail wieners, overstuffed packs of bacon. A sign above the door was both a label and a warning: "Pork Shop," it read, "For non-Muslims."

Signs around the building announced special deals tied to the World Cup. Artificial stadium crowd noise filtered out through speakers near the entrance. A German journalist in loafers examined a bottle of Italian wine.

But the U.S. Soccer staff members had to be sensible. Each individual permit holder is granted a monthly quota of 2,000 Qatari riyals, roughly \$550. And the Americans were on what amounted to a supply mission: They needed enough alcohol not only for their colleagues traveling with the team but also to meet the needs of the large group of players' family and friends. That group, one of the staff members said, had been peering them with desperate requests. Even with multiple permits, the Americans were hunting for bargains.

"This isn't, like, sipping wine," one of the U.S. team staff members said. "This is survival wine."

It soon became clear, though, that the happiest place in Doha (for those inclined to drink) was also one of the most exclusive. In the car, Shaj, who is Muslim and from Sri Lanka, told me he had never been inside the Q.D.C. despite living in Qatar for 12 years. The store's permit requirements include a minimum salary of 3,000 Qatari riyals a month (about \$825) to even apply for entry. That puts legal alcohol essen-

Strict restrictions and entry fees keep most residents out.

tially out of reach for the hundreds of thousands of immigrant laborers who make up nearly 90 percent of Qatar's population; many of them make close to the minimum wage of \$275 a month.

While the Q.D.C. has been hailed as an oasis for thirsty visitors, others, including Shaj, see its strict restrictions — and its limits on access — as unfair. To them, the rules are merely another example of the sort of structural inequalities that are part and parcel of daily life for them in Qatar.

Unable to access alcohol in the same way as white-collar residents and high-end visitors, he and others instead rely on a black market for it. His beverage of choice, he said, is vodka, which he buys at a considerable markup and only drinks inside the room he shares with three other workers. "This double standard," Shaj said, "I don't like."

His sentiments were echoed on a recent Friday night in Asian Town, an area of Doha populated by tens of thousands of foreign workers from countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The neighborhood is only two miles from the hidden bounty of the Q.D.C., but it feels in some ways like a universe apart.

"Muslim, Hindu, who doesn't drink here?" said Hari, a heavy goods vehicle driver from Kathmandu, Nepal, who was headed to a World Cup fan zone after having a few glasses of whiskey at home. Like Shaj, he asked that his full name not be revealed out of fear of running afoul of the authorities or potential employers. "Everyone is scared to talk about it because it is forbidden here."

After nine years in Qatar, Hari said that he has eked out enough money to purchase brand name alcoholic beverages from the market. But he knows most other workers do not have that luxury. Some in



The retail location of the Qatar Distribution Company, the nation's sole importer and distributor of alcohol.

Asian Town buy amateur brews made from fermented fruit. Others turn to homemade, chemically enhanced, hard spirits.

One popular variety of local moonshine, nicknamed Sri Lanka, is sold in plastic water bottles for around \$8. Hari said it is as potent and possibly dangerous: Medical officials in Nepal believe such concoctions might have resulted in the deaths of migrant workers in Qatar and elsewhere in the Gulf.

The scene in Asian Town was a far cry from the state-sanctioned bonhomie of the Q.D.C.

Shoppers last week were weaving their carts around pyramids of stacked beer cans. A 24-pack of Budweiser was selling for 188 Qatari riyals, or roughly \$52. Nearby, a bottle of Cristal Champagne was listed for about \$489.

There are strict rules for people allowed inside. Aside from income restrictions, customers cannot come from member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Regular customers pay membership fees but cannot resell the alcohol or even give it to someone as a gift. And upon leaving, buyers must keep their purchases concealed until they make it home.

Overall, though, the government in recent years has been making the Q.D.C. experience more customer friendly. During the pandemic, the store has introduced perks like online ordering also one of the most exclusive. These days get text messages advertising special sales.

As the U.S. team members shopped, a Q.D.C. employee sidled over to let them know that their individual quotas had been doubled for the World Cup. That would certainly \$825) to even apply for entry. They thanked her and rolled their jangling caravan toward the cash registers.

Tariq Panja contributed reporting.