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Published on 17.6.18

Final-minute goals a common feature of almost all games so far

A ready but cautious Brazil will begin their 2018 FIFA World Cup campaign against Switzerland on Sunday. Memories of that heart breaking 1-7 loss to Germany cannot have been easy to overcome but it's something they have to put aside or it will not leave much room for an easy run through the group stage.

Their preparations have gone to plan, with the focus more on tactical training as many of the players were coming off tough club seasons. Under coach Tite, the team has seen a turnaround, and what could have been a difficult road to Russia turned out to be a straightforward one. It's really great to see the way the boys have responded to Tite. They are pushing themselves and working hard, and responsibly, to reach top form. They have carried their qualification form into the warm-ups over the last few weeks, and are displaying the right attitude and desire. And this means that fans are now again excited about their team.

The defence of the team has proved to be unquestionable under Tite with a clean sheet in 16 games out of 21 games. From the middle to the front the performance of the new version of the "magic square", formed by Neymar, Gabriel Jesus, Willian and Philippe Coutinho, has been indisputable. This tactic has been productive for the attack and it is the individual quality of the players that has brought the results.

Switzerland is No. 6 in the FIFA rankings and their defensive system is their great strength. In the qualifiers, they finished the first phase in second place of group B, with an almost perfect campaign – nine victories in 10 games. The Swiss are an energetic group, with a lot of pace, and are good on the counter-attack. Xherdan Shaqiri is their best attacking player. He has vision, is quick and a good dribbler.

The World Cup is just two days old but one important detail can already be noticed – all the matches have seen last-minute goals. Of the three matches on Friday that saw goals in the final minutes, the highlight has to be the exciting Spain-Portugal game in Sochi with Cristiano Ronaldo's hat-trick, including the late goal that saw the duel end on equal terms. Of course, the opening match on Thursday saw Russian goals in the final moments that turned what was anyway a victory over Saudi Arabia into a 5-0 thrashing! So, two days, four games, 13 goals. The World Cup is already showing signs that it's going to be a really entertaining one.

Published on 22.6.18

Ronaldo remains impressive; teams generating tight scores

Brazil's first game of the 2018 World Cup was a good test, and a reality check. Switzerland were physical and tried slowing down Brazil's rhythm. That earned the five-time champions a surprising result – a 1-1 draw – that was probably not one that was expected of them considering their form coming into the tournament. While the first half belonged to Brazil, with Philippe Coutinho giving them the lead, the Swiss managed to keep Neymar at bay. He did not have the best of outings, with quite a few wayward shots. Switzerland woke up in the second half, created many chances and made the Brazilian defence work really hard.

I feel the next game, against Costa Rica, will not be very different. Both teams will be looking for a win, more so Costa Rica as they lost their opening match to Serbia. Head-to-head, it is Los Ticos 1, Brazil 9, but they should not be taken lightly as they have been known to take down big teams. They reached the quarter finals in the last World Cup, shocking Italy, England and Uruguay.

Where Brazil is concerned, despite the draw, I feel Coach Tite should avoid changing the team's dynamics too soon as this could affect the players' confidence. If any drastic changes have to be made, they should come in the final group match, against Serbia. For now, the coach should focus on adjustments in positioning, increase the pressure towards the ball and better moving on the right side of the field.

I feel that Neymar is still their key man even though there was a bit of an injury scare at training on Tuesday. He was back at practice on Wednesday, so it's fingers crossed that all will be well and he will take the field on Friday.

One of the things I have noticed this year is that teams like Portugal, Spain and Uruguay have all been generating tight scores. This time, I feel more teams are at the same pace as Brazil, and for that reason they need to step up their efforts if they plan to win or have better results.

The highlight of the week so far has been the impressive performance by Cristiano Ronaldo that has made him the top scorer of the competition with four goals in two games, converting 80 per cent of the chances he has had. Also, I should mention Luis Suarez, who scored the only goal in Uruguay's 1-0 win over Saudi Arabia at the Rostov Arena on Wednesday. The 31-year-old striker thus became the first Uruguayan to score in three separate World Cups, after also doing so in 2010 and 2014.

Published on 27.6.18

Brazil starting line-up key factor; several edge-of-seat matches

Brazil beat Costa Rica 2-0, after being held 1-1 against Switzerland, to stay in the hunt for a place in the last-16. The question is: will Coach Tite now keep the same starting line-up against Serbia on Wednesday as he did against the Central Americans? Will opting for any change make any difference? Brazil's first two matches have given the coach enough time to understand both, his players and the opponents.

Against Serbia, who cannot for one second be taken for granted, Tite has the option to keep the same starting line-up that played against Costa Rica. I feel, however, that now is the right time to experiment. He made a good change by bringing in Douglas Costa as he was the key figure for the victory over Costa Rica. It was confirmed a day after the game that he had suffered a muscle injury, but he still has all the ingredients with which he can change the menu of the team's dynamic for a win.

I feel Firmino should replace Jesus: this will not only add a second attacker, but qualities such as best aerial, and unpredictable, moves at the centre of the field. However, it seems, according to reports, that Tite will keep Jesus and Willian in the XI to face Serbia.

Paulinho should be given more freedom, to allow him to play the way he did when Brazil beat Germany in a friendly game in March. Renato Augusto did not have a good 2017 and lost his space. However, he is a player whose rise was prepared by Tite, and the coach trusts and knows him well and he is another option. Brazil have stumbled their way through their first two matches, and at the end of the day know that they will need to win comfortably to top the group and ensure a spot in the last-16.

Monday night saw a couple of matches that had us at the edge of our seats. Cristiano Ronaldo had an uninspired outing against Iran in Saransk, having a penalty saved and picking up a yellow card, after Ricardo Quaresma scored a beautiful goal to give Portugal the lead. However, Iran managed to equalise in injury time to secure a draw, and push Portugal to second place in the group. In Kaliningrad, Spain were close to losing before Iago Aspas managed to level it 2-2, also in injury time, and help them top the group.

Published on 30.6.18

Brazil need to focus on the mental and technical; Germany loss due to imbalanced side

If victory is the ultimate goal, then Brazil need to keep focusing their preparation on the mental and technical because their ability is going to be really put to the test from now on. A loss in the Round of 16, after coming this far, can send two years' worth of hard work straight into the ditch. For Neymar's generation, the impact of a loss may be even greater, as there have years of accumulated failures since they last lifted the Jules Rimet trophy in 2002.

Gabriel Jesus's trademark hand gesture — Alomãe (Hello Mother) — has yet to make an appearance in Russia. He was the top scorer for the Brazilians with 10 goals in the World Cup qualifiers and warm-ups. He wears the No. 9 jersey, a big one for him to fill as that number belonged to a certain Ronaldo Luís Nazário de Lima —O Fenômeno.

He has yet to live up to the history of that shirt in this World Cup: according to FIFA data, Jesus has had six chances of finishing, one less than Coutinho, and Neymar 18. Coutinho is in brilliant form and everyone is expecting Neymar to shine but so far Coutinho has been the main star for Brazil with his goals and assists.

Brazil have been gaining a lot of support for their match against Mexico. However, we must not forget that Mexico have some very skilled players of their own, like Hirving Lozano and Carlos Vela. If they exhibit the same energy they did in their 1-0 win over Germany in the group stage, Mexico have a great chance to oust the five-time champions. However, they will have to get past the trio of Neymar, Coutinho and Firmino.

On Saturday, in a clash of former champions, Argentina will take on France. The Albicelestes have managed to find a formation that pleases Messi. They played 4-4-2 in place of 3-4-3, against Nigeria, which helped them beat the Africans 2-1 and make it to the knock-out stage. Right up to the eve of the World Cup finals, and even during, Jorge Sampaoli kept making changes to try and find some definition in the Argentine team. This time his choice was reasonable, given the result.

Finally, a word on Germany. They came into this World Cup as champions, and that brings its own pressure. Then, the lack of suitable selection made them an imbalanced side so it's not hard to see what caused their chances and goals to be blocked, and made them unable to break down their opponents.

Published on 6.7.18

Despite a strong defence, Brazil will have it tough against a formidable Belgium

The Round of 16 at the FIFA World Cup threw up another star for Brazil, someone who thus far had been under the radar, and whose presence in the side had been questioned. Against Mexico, however, he proved himself worthy of Tite's faith in him. Willian, the right winger, was the bright spot throughout the match with his speed, dribbles, and attacks, bringing stability to Tite's tactical arrangement.

Neymar's goal in the first half – set up by Willian – paved the way for the victory while in the second, Brazil found their balance and space with Firmino scoring to make it 2-0, ensuring their passage to the quarter finals.

Talking about Neymar, while he may be brilliant on the pitch, the Brazilian striker has been drawing a lot of flak from fans and media alike for all his drama. The press has called him “pampered and grumpy”, yet I do feel that he has become a target for opponents and perhaps he overacts because he sometimes feels unprotected. Still, I hope he stops being so dramatic because it could harm the team.

It has been gradual, but Tite's boys are showing us the face of the team that dominated the qualifiers and were convincing in the friendlies, allowing them to assume the status of favourites in Russia. The next challenge to this status comes on Friday, when they take on Belgium in Kazan, a match many consider worthy of a final. The last, and only, time Brazil and Belgium played each other in World Cups was way back in 2002 when the South Americans were the eventual winners.

Against Mexico, Brazil were not as free-flowing as they usually are. They are, however, strong in defence; have an experienced and wily midfield (even without Casemiro who will sit out because of yellow cards), and the ever-present scoring threat of Neymar, Coutinho, Jesus and Firmino up front. I think Brazil should take advantage of the Belgium defence because right now it seems a little shaky, the two goals by Japan proving this.

Still, Belgium will be formidable opponents, no doubt about that, and the way they managed to turn things around against Japan will make them feel that they have more than a shot at a semi-final spot here (if they do make it, it would be their second after 1986). They have a great offensive play with Eden Hazard and Romelu Lukaku, who are capable of doing some damage. These two, along with Kevin De Bruyne form a lethal attack that could help them to the last four. (Gameplan)

Published on 9.7.18

England can get past Croatia, France-Belgium should be a thriller

The elimination of Brazil in the quarter finals of the World Cup was because of a tactical surprise sprung by Belgium coach Roberto Martinez, to which his Brazilian counterpart Tite was slow to respond. An unexpected change in the system by the European side left the tournament favourites disorientated in the first half, giving the Belgians the advantage. Tite responded well in the second, but it was not enough.

Belgium had been playing 5-4-1, a formation that had serious deficiencies in defence. But in the first few seconds of the game, it was clear that Martinez had changed the system. The Belgians defended themselves in a 4-3-3. The biggest surprise was forward Lukaku on the right, and midfielder De Bruyne in a "false 9" position.

Tite and his think tank chose to "hug" Neymar, who was still showing signs of immaturity. Over the last two years, as Brazil underwent a change in command, the strategy was to do everything to protect and comfort him. The World Cup in Russia showed that that plan was not enough.

It is good that the two best teams in the quarter finals have made the semi-finals: England, who beat Sweden 2-0, and Croatia, who got past Russia on penalties after a 1-1 draw in regulation time, and 2-2 after extra-time. It's not like they are the two most handsome teams around or that they play superior football. Not at all! However, at least they play with the ball on the ground, always looking to make headway into opposition goal.

Croatia have in midfielder Modric the best player in the World Cup so far, while the French have the genial Mbappé. Modric is a genuine, skilful and active midfielder who gives his team rhythm with intelligent and accurate passes.

England were much better on the day than Sweden; a side that despite their giant Vikings took in two goals – both headers – from Harry Maguire and Dele Alli. England are not a brilliant team, but they comprise many youngsters with sound technique who, I feel, can get past Croatia.

However, I predict that "the match" of this World Cup will be the semi-final between France and Belgium, both of whom play an airy, clever, attacking yet pleasant-to-watch game. Both teams have reached the last four without losing a game, and both have quality players capable of executing defining moments in a match. I think we can look forward to a thriller. (Gameplan)

Published on 18.7.18

Perhaps it time for South America to push the panic button

France, the most consistent team throughout the tournament, fittingly won the World Cup on Sunday, beating Croatia 4-2. The latter were worthy opponents, passionate and determined, and have won hearts around the world with their never-say-die attitude. Russia brought us several exciting matches from the get-go. Here are some of the takeaways:

VAR: Video Assistant Referees (VAR) were used for the first time at a World Cup. Not counting the final and the third-place matches, there were 465 referrals. This made defenders wary about penalties but also allowed more goals in the area. Finally, however, FIFA's objective was achieved with an increase in the number of goals.

Set Pieces: Another talking point is that this was a tournament of set-pieces, with 70 goals coming from dead-ball situations. Close to half the goals (42.8%) scored had their origin in fouls, corner-kicks, penalties or side-kicks.

Ball Possession: This World Cup taught us that possession does not equal a win. Of the 16 matches in the knockout, 10 were defeated by teams who had less time on the ball. In the final, Croatia had 61% possession and lost. The world champions, in fact, had less control of the ball in five of their seven matches.

South Americans: South America has been seen as the bastion of the game but this time not one South American team reached the semi-finals. South America has not won a title in four editions, and has only had one finalist during that time. Brazil was the last to win, in 2002. Since 2006, European teams have won it, with only Argentina reaching the 2014 final. Time, perhaps, to push the panic button!

Shining Stars: Though Luka Modric was handed the Golden Ball, there were a number of players who could also have been voted "World Cup Star" — Hazard, Mbappé, Griezmann, Rakitic, Pogba — showing that there was no one outstanding player. The stars we thought would shine didn't do very well in Russia. Ronaldo, Messi, Neymar, Kroos, Marcelo, Suárez, Iniesta, Lewandowski, Salah — just to name a few we regularly cheer in European championships — played below expectation. Maintaining the theory that this Cup was more about the group than the individual.

Goalkeepers: Though Belgium goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois was awarded the Golden Glove, others in contention were England's Jordan Pickford, Danijel Subasic of Croatia, and France captain Hugo Lloris, the latter perhaps losing out for that blunder in the final. Courtois ended the competition with 27 defences. There was a record, too, by Egyptian Essam El-Hadary who became the oldest player to play in a World Cup, at age 45. In the game against Arabia, he defended a penalty. (Gameplan)