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Published 16.10.17

Brazil and Mexico are my dark horses

The Fifa U-17 World Cup has kept all of India enthralled and, of course, everyone would have loved to have seen the hosts qualify for the Round of 16 but they have made us all proud. Overall, when I look at the 16 teams that have made it, I don't see any real surprises. Every team there deserves to be there. Europe, South and Central America and Asia are well represented, as expected, and so is Africa with Niger, Ghana and Mali. Of these three, perhaps Niger, for me, is a bit of a surprise because, frankly speaking, I hadn't heard much about their football but I'm beginning to learn now.

Iran beating Germany 4-0, of course, was a shock and they also went on to win their last group match, against Costa Rica, 3-0. They seem a strong side and have a good chance to go through to the quarters. I think they are a little bit ahead of Mexico, whom they meet next, and will get past them. Germany will meet Colombia, and I still expect a lot from them. The thing is with Germany you never know; they seem a stable side so I hope they do well. I feel they will be within the four best in this competition.

Looking at other match-ups, one of the games I think will be really interesting is France vs Spain which is like a European derby! And the other will be the African derby between Ghana vs Niger. The France-Spain match will see a more physical Spain against France who are more technical. It will be interesting to see the strategy at play and the way they deal with each other.

I feel Brazil will also make the semis, and I will be keeping an eye on their match against Honduras. I'm sure Honduras will be making their plans for Brazil, trying to figure out how to defend and attack them. The thing is that Brazil is not a very precise team, especially in the way they attack. How they defend is much easier to predict. The players don't depend much on a system and play more freely. I don't think they will have many problems getting past Honduras.

Finally, I think England are looking very solid and are one of my favourites. As are Brazil. Iran are one of the dark horses who just may surprise everyone. Mexico is another dark horse: They lost to England 3-2 but were down 3-0 at one stage. If they had 10 minutes more, they just might have equalised. They showed they can handle pressure and can take their game to another level when things get difficult. (Gameplan)

Published 20.10.17

Not much difference between Brazil and Germany

We are coming to the business end of the tournament and obviously the competition is getting stronger. First, let's talk about Mali and Ghana who are both through to the quarter finals, where they meet each other. They played very physical games which did not make for entertaining football. They have, however, proven that they are strong contenders. Mali had quite an easy time against Iraq, while Ghana showed, against Niger, they were far superior. Mali have been scoring regularly, which shows they have a very strong forward line. They will take this confidence into the quarter final. Ghana didn't start the competition on a winning note but did well to come back. This will be an interesting game, but I think Ghana have the edge.

The England-Japan match was a very technical one. I was quite surprised by England because they changed the way they have been playing. They used to play long balls, but this time they were happy just keeping position. Japan posed problems for them because Japan have some really fast players who can change the pace of a game as required. England came up against US in the quarters, and it will be difficult for the Americans to get past them. The US got through as one of the best third-placed teams and sometimes they look as if they are not playing to potential. England are very physically strong, and clear about what they want. They are solid in the back and have the players to build a game from there. I like the look of this team.

I said, after their win against Germany, that Iran were strong contenders. I also said they would get past Mexico and are now the only Asian team left in the competition. They take on Spain in another interesting quarter final and I feel they are ready for the precision football that Spain plays. Iran are defending very well and will look to go in for the kill. I really do think they have a good chance of moving ahead.

Brazil are also through, and meet Germany next. This is going to be one of the big matches of the quarters and one that will bring up some unwanted memories of World Cup 2014. This young German side are playing a beautiful game and are not afraid of changing their style to suit the occasion. Brazil are not playing predictable football; they are playing from the wings, are penetrating well, and the back are also playing well. There is not much difference between these two sides.

So, my prediction for the semi-final line up is: England, Ghana and Iran. As for the fourth team – will it be Germany or Brazil? That is THE question! My heart says Brazil, obviously. Germany are also a very strong side, but if Brazil keep playing the way they have, I think they just might go through. (Gameplan)

Published 24.10.17

Brazil will find the going tough against England

I am obviously very pleased that Brazil are in the semi-finals of the FIFA U-17 World Cup. Germany are a strong unit and controlled the match, especially the first half, but Brazil came back fighting in the second. I think it was more about mental strength as there wasn't really much difference between the sides; the team that stayed strong mentally was the one that won. There was also not much of a difference between England and the US, despite the 4-1 score line, the latter even getting a couple of chances that could have changed the game for them had they taken them.

England meet Brazil now, and I feel the South Americans will find the going tough. But they will be carrying the confidence of beating the Germans, coming from behind, into that match and will fancy their chances. England are looking very good and have done so throughout the tournament so far. They are very strong in the back, and good in the middle as well. When they go on the attack they could prove to be a big challenge for Brazil, who will just have to play the way they did in the second half against Germany, stay mentally strong and be constant, and generally keep playing the way, they have been. They looked for space against Germany and got it, giving them time to decide what to do and eventually come out winners.

Mali are continuing to prove they are a force to contend with by beating Ghana to also make it to the semis, where they will meet Spain. Both Mali and Ghana are very strong teams physically, but on the day Mali were better. They have fast players, were better in the attacking zone and that was perhaps the difference.

A confident Mali will now face Spain, and the pressure will be on the European side. They will be seen as the favourites while Mali will come out with nothing to lose. Mali need to go all out again and play that same kind of attacking football they did against Ghana. Spain is good at keeping possession, they are a patient side and wait for the right moments to take their chances. Mali play a fast game and will find it difficult against Spain who tend to control the pace of the game and slow it down. So it will be important for Mali to take their chances, too. And if they play the way they did against Ghana, anything might happen.

The tournament is obviously getting tighter and tighter now as the best teams move forward, and my feeling is that it will be a Brazil-Spain final. (Gameplan)

Published 28.10.17

Spain is a good side, but I think it will England's night

I am obviously very disappointed Brazil did not make the FIFA U-17 World Cup final, but still I say they have proved they are a good team. They were just not that effective against England in the semi-final as they had been in the tournament till then. There were a few moments where they could have scored when it was 1-1. If they had, it might have been a different story. They didn't take the opportunities they created and just didn't attack enough. In the end they, they were tactically outplayed by England, who prepared well and just didn't allow them get on top and control the match.

In the other semi-final, Mali didn't play badly, it's just that Spain played at a different level and were far superior. In fact, I think that match was one of the best they have played in this competition. They were technically and tactically better; physically Mali was the stronger side, but Spain were able to keep possession for most of the match and Mali did not get many chances to put their feet to the ball.

So now we will see a new champion emerge with Spain and England vying for their maiden title on Saturday. This will be the second major final in which they will face each other this year after Spain beat England 4-1 on penalties in the U-17 Euro final. So, they will both know what is expected of them at this level.

It's really difficult to separate them. We have the two best teams in the final. Spain, I think, are technically slightly ahead of England, who will be aware of this and do their homework well. They play a tactical game of keeping the ball as much as they can while waiting for the right moment, which is slightly different from Spain who like to keep the ball but work it around among themselves. England, on the other hand, play a waiting game. They keep calm, stay in position, wait to take possession and when they do, they quickly go on the attack.

Brazil may not be in the final, but have been playing some exciting, beautiful football. But, then there is England, who are playing some effective, consistent football. So, it's hard to choose between them and Spain, but I am really liking the way England are playing — they may not be playing beautiful football but they know what they want. So, I feel Saturday night will be their night. (Gameplan)

Published 30.10.17

A well deserved win for the tournament's most consistent side

Once England, my favourites, went down 0-2, I thought that was going to be that. I don't think anyone, anywhere, thought England would come from behind the way they did to lift the U-17 FIFA title on Saturday at the Salt Lake Stadium.

As I have said before, England are a very patient team and are willing to wait for their chances. They didn't panic, kept calm and kept playing the way they have been. But besides their technical and tactical skills, they are mentally very strong. In fact, the mental aspect is something they have been working on a lot for a while. This was a problem they felt needed to be addressed and the results are there for all to see now.

Spain went from attacking to defending mode, but failed to get back to attacking mode again. I think they fought to the end, and for part of the match they were very strong and on top; they kept up the pace they began with but couldn't keep the momentum going. The main problem was that they were just not able to hold the English attack, which was so precise with its crosses and finishes. In Rhian Brewster and Philip Foden they had the two best players of the competition and in the end, it was a well deserved win for the most consistent side of the tournament.

The tournament itself was a wonderful success, a fantastic experience, and the response was really good. Sometime ago someone said India was a football giant that has been sleeping. I think this competition has woken up the giant. India has proved to the world, with record spectators and TV viewership, that we are a football nation as well. And we are being recognized for that now. The success of a tournament of this level will also encourage a lot more kids to take up the game seriously.

Our boys may not have made the second round but they put in good performances. It was good to see the level at which we are, and what we saw was that India were not that far off. Our U-17 boys will inspire a new generation of players in India. We have the vision; we just have to sit down, set a plan and work on it and India can get to the level we need to really compete on the world stage. (Gameplan)