

LOTHAR MATTHAEUS

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Spain is convincing, Argentina looks shaky

Now that all the teams have played once, it's time for a first assessment of this World Cup. And right from the outset I can clearly say this: This World Cup is really fun. The football is disciplined and fair, there are no nasty fouls, and so far the video assistant referee (VAR) has been working decently, even though in two, maybe three scenes I would have ruled otherwise. But so far the VAR has fulfilled its task very well.

This is a tournament being played at a good level, also because one can see that the so-called smaller teams are good for a surprise. I am not going so far as to say that one of the smaller teams will be the next world champion. But they can be counted on to continue to achieve things against the favourites. With the exception of Saudi Arabia, so far no team has disappointed. This shows that international football is drawing more and more closely together and that athleticism is increasing. In addition, the organisation of the smaller teams is getting increasingly better, and so that's why some of the favourites are having some problems.

What I especially like is that there has been a fast-paced football even from those teams that one had not expected it from. This means a rapid changeover from defence to offence, the kind that defending world champions Germany had major problems with against Mexico. I had expected this from Mexico, but other teams also are confident in this style of play. Even Panama tried it against Belgium.

This World Cup has also shown how important the set piece situations are in football. These should be practiced more. Set pieces could particularly benefit the big teams in helping them live up to their favourites billing. When an opponent lies so deeply back in its own area, not too many scoring chances can be created. Set piece situations are a weapon that can decide matches. Just think of England's Harry Kane against Tunisia or Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo against Spain. This looks to be an emerging trend.

And talking about Ronaldo: for me, the tournament got off to a really good start with the Spain-Portugal match. Despite giving up three goals, Spain has been the most convincing among all the favourites. Their defence was not as bad as it would appear, for one of the goals resulted from a mistake by the keeper and the other two were a penalty shot and a free kick, in other words, two set piece situations.

Up front, the Spaniards have so far demonstrated the highest quality of play, and after setbacks when the other team scored, the team showed its character. Among the top-name teams, I have also been very pleased by England, even though I don't count them among the circle of favourites. But their style of play was convincing.

When it comes to team unity, then Iceland was outstanding. I have never before in my life seen how a team played as a disciplined collective with a very clear strategy the way Iceland played and maintained for the entire match against Argentina. The 93rd minute was a mirror-image of the first second in terms of their system and order. That was remarkable.

But Argentina also did a few things wrong. They were always trying to attack through the middle, and their game is also much too focussed on Lionel Messi. This is not good for the team, but also not for Messi, who constantly was surrounded by four or five opposing players. Like a magnet, he was being sought out by his team, a tactic that is too transparent. Argentina also has some problems in the defence as well.

What Cristiano Ronaldo achieved with his three goals was sensational, even if, as already mentioned, they resulted from a keeper mistake, a penalty and a free kick. But with his technique he is predestined for such set piece situations. Moreover, one notices that he has better contact with his teammates than Messi does. Messi is the player they are looking for and shift the responsibility to, but I'm missing the communication with his teammates.

With Portugal it is a completely different story. Ronaldo is the leading figure who organises and directs the others. With his free kick at the end of the match he illustrated his uniquely individual quality. In their own ways, Messi and Ronaldo are world-class players, but they are not comparable. Messi thrives on his dribbling and so is more the magician. Ronaldo wins with the power of his shots, with his sheer force. He is more the ice-cold type.

To me, Argentina is, among the major teams, one of the most in danger of being eliminated in the group phase of play. They are in a strong group with such other opponents as Croatia and Nigeria. Those are two teams that are tough to play against. Brazil, despite its 1-1 against Switzerland, should go through. And if Germany finds its usual form against Sweden and South Korea, it too should reach the final 16 round.

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This World Cup is a warning to the big nations; Neymar should quit his antics

The group play phase is over, so it's time for an interim appraisal of this World Cup. To me there was one really huge surprise, one which in the end really wasn't so much so. Of course prior to the tournament I had not been expecting defending world champions Germany to crash out in the group phase. But after their first two matches it was no longer surprising, only sad. As deserved as the 2014 title was for Germany, so deserved is it that they have been eliminated.

Not a single German player reached his normal form. Most of them had problems to battle with, be it exhaustion, age, injuries, lack of self-confidence. This above all applies to those players who were actually supposed to be team leaders, such as Jerome Boateng, Thomas Mueller, Sami Khedira or Mesut Ozil. Goalkeeper Manuel Neuer was the only one who performed to expectations. Otherwise nothing was in order with the team, either in the back or up front. There was no real team spirit, but instead many vulnerabilities and a lot of debate off the field. Given this, no unity and focus on winning the title could evolve like in 2014.

German manager Joachim Loew put a lot of store in the old proven players and barely brought forth any of the young and fresh talents such as we admired last year at the Confederations Cup. And so Germany lacked freshness, pace, and the surprise element. The fact that four of the last five world champions crashed out in group play phase certainly has something to do with complacency and insufficient motivation.

Loew must now ask himself some tough questions as well as come up with a plan and above all the will to build up a new team all over again, especially due to the age issues of some of the players. He has done excellent work in the past, but now he is under real pressure again. I could well understand it if he said, I'll give someone else a chance.

Looking beyond the Germany issue, overall one can see after the group phase of play that the so-called smaller nations have caught up, that world football has closed ranks even more. For example, Morocco was, to me, better than Iran, Portugal and Spain in all three group matches. This showed the quality of the outsiders who have caught up physically and tactically and in the meantime have many players and trainers with experience in the major international leagues.

For the major nations, this World Cup is a warning that they have to be wide awake from the starting whistle. And it also has been seen that the ball-control style of play of the Spaniards but also the Germans no longer automatically leads to success. You have to change the rhythm of play more often.

But having said this, I also believe that the longer the tournament lasts the better the major teams will prevail. I am still expecting some close results, but individual quality will tip the scales. In the group play, the teams that impressed me the most were England, Croatia and Belgium, and to a certain extent Brazil, which possesses some very high individual quality. This especially applies to Neymar, and so he shouldn't find it necessary to provoke others, trying to gain penalty shots, or rolling over five or six times on the ground after being fouled. He should stop such antics, which might start to harm him by getting the fans against him and make referees less inclined in the future to so quickly blow the whistle when he is fouled.

As to Argentina, I'm sticking with my previous opinion: This team is only strong if Lionel Messi can come through with a big performance. He succeeds in this with the national team only rarely because things are not so well-oiled as is the case at FC Barcelona. I do not believe that Argentina will get very far because their defence has a lot of coordination issues. I think that France will be the end of the road for Argentina. This is the highlight of the final 16 round because it is two former world champions facing each other.

What I think will be exciting is Uruguay against Portugal. I said before the tournament that Uruguay will make it to the semi-finals. With regards to European Champions Portugal, I have some major doubts. Till now it has been Cristiano Ronaldo and nothing else. If he has a really good day then they might make the quarter-finals. But I see Uruguay with the edge.

This also applies regarding Spain against the hosts Russia, Brazil against Mexico, Croatia against Denmark and Switzerland versus Sweden, although both the Danes and Swedes are physically very strong and well-organised. Colombia has a strong team, one that I have high regard for similar to Uruguay. Their match against England will certainly be interesting to watch. Japan is the clear outsider against Belgium. I had actually been expecting either Senegal or Nigeria to reach the final 16. Both just narrowly failed and in Senegal's case it wasn't from the results on the field but rather the Fair-Play rule. This is a shame for the Africans.

A final word about one major ongoing issue during the group phase, Diego Maradona: He was a gifted player, the best midfielder in football up to the late 1980s. As a footballer he did a great deal of good for the game. But watching him in his current state is, for me, one of two sad aspects of this World Cup. The other one? The weak showing and failure of the defending world champions Germany.

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All four semi-finalists are very deserving in this quality-driven World Cup

Before delving into the two semi-final matches, I have to look back on the quarter finals. The Belgians impressed me the most. That 2-1 win over Brazil was one of the best matches at this World Cup. It had everything that you want from football – drive, skill, and drama. Belgium's victory was not a big surprise for me. Their win confirmed once more the trend of this World Cup – the supposedly small nations are sending the bigger ones packing.

This was the fate of the great Brazilians just as much as it was for defending world champions Germany and for former champions Argentina and Spain. If somebody before the tournament had predicted that none of these four would be in the semi-finals, we all would have just shaken our heads. But now this must be said: France, Belgium, England, and Croatia are all very deserving to be in the final four. They played at a high level, and consistently so.

Quality has won the day at this World Cup: England with its fast players, Croatia with its cleverness, France with its team unity, and Belgium with its tactical sophistication. The Brazilians were taken by Belgium's move to have Romelu Lukaku attack down the right side and use Kevin De Bruyne as a false-nine. The Brazilian defence didn't know how to handle it. It was a tactical masterpiece by the Belgians, and together with their individual talent and efficiency, it was the key to their success. You can't reproach the Brazilians, and they left the pitch with their heads held high. Against Belgium they were not the worse team and in the end failed against a strong Belgian side. In contrast to world champions Germany who lost to mediocre teams like South Korea and Mexico.

As to England, it is evident just what great potential they have with their many young players like John Stones and Harry Kane. I like Kane not just because of his six goals, but also because he works for his team and leads the way as its captain. Something is developing here as one can see with England's youth national team and its overall cultivation of young talent. England also profits from its strong Premier League that features international players and such trainers as Jose Mourinho, Pep Guardiola and Juergen Klopp. One has to keep an eye on England for the tournaments ahead.

Both semi-final pairings are evenly matched. There are no clear favourites either in the France-Belgium or England-Croatia matches. England or Croatia can very well be imagined as winning the final against France or Belgium. Of the four teams, France is the only one which was held beforehand as one of the favourites to finish second, third or fourth. This was not absolutely the case with the others. Croatia reminds me a bit of the Argentinians of 1990 who clawed their way to the final via two penalty shoot-outs.

France is above all convincing as a unified team. They present a very disciplined organisation, something that is a bit surprising for this young side. Despite having exceptional players in its ranks, France plays with even more unity than the Belgians, who for their part are somewhat better staffed in their attack. Above all, I am delighted by Lukaku, not just because of his four goals, but also because of the effort he puts in for Belgium and for his enormous power and presence. Lukaku, De Bruyne and Eden Hazard comprise a trio whose attacking quality is somewhat better than that of the French. With France, alongside Kylian Mbappe and Antoine Griezmann, it is centre-forward Olivier Giroud as a quick-passer who is very important. But he does not possess the individual capabilities such as is in evidence with the Belgian trio. Despite these small differences between the teams, it promises to be a brutally even match which could be decided by one of the superstars of either team.

As to individual players, if I were putting together a side from this tournament I would probably not have Argentina's Lionel Messi, Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo or Brazil's Neymar on it. They all left the stage too early, and despite some individual moments of brilliance could not put their stamp on the tournament. The bar is set very high for them, and so in this regard one must conclude that Messi was largely a disappointment, Ronaldo was convincing only against Spain and Neymar was noticed for a lot of things, not always for his footballing qualities. There are better players in the tournament such as Mbappe, Hazard, Lukaku, De Bruyne, Kane, and Croatia's Mario Mandzukic.

So, new names and new teams are shaping this World Cup. This will probably also affect the choice of the World Player of the Year title. If the highly-touted Mbappe becomes world champion with France and scores one or two more goals, then I could well imagine that FIFA on September 24 will be presenting a different name than Ronaldo or Messi for the first time after ten years. I even believe that one of the attacking trio of Belgium, or Kane, with more goals and winning the World Cup title, could win the honours. Ronaldo did score many goals in helping Real Madrid win its third Champions League title in-a-row, but he finished only third in the Spanish league and crashed out of the World Cup in the round of 16. I cannot at all imagine Neymar being named World Player of the Year. His bowing out in the quarter finals and above all his play-acting on the pitch certainly weren't helpful.

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Football's future belong to France and England who have the recipe for success

Before talking about the World Cup final of France against Croatia, I still want to discuss what we saw during the semi-finals. It is now evident just how valuable experience can be in football. Croatia made use of the experience of its players, whereby the English side made it easy for them.

After their early lead, the English never again found the right pace for their game and did not have the accurate or clear passing that they had shown against Colombia and Sweden. As a result they could not make good use of their fast attacking forwards. England reacted very shakily and Croatia was able, thanks to its experience, cleverness and mentality, find their way back into the match.

Now the Croatians have deservedly reached the final. That it worked for them can be ascribed more to mental rather than physical strength. This team is not only stamped by its attitude, but also is one with immense experience and self-confidence of players who are under contract with many top European clubs. Many of them, after winning titles with their clubs, arrived at the World Cup with positive energy. Moreover, in the big clubs the Croatian players learn to shed any complacency and recklessness. They know that every training session, every match, is important.

I personally have worked in the Balkans and therefore know what factor it is that accounts for the wealth of good players, not only in football but also other ball sports: Free spirits are given more room. After their early exit as defending world champions this time around, there is now discussion about this going on in Germany. The Croatians show how it's done: They let their children play. They can dribble with the ball, take shots at the goal, be daring and creative – and not have to subordinate themselves to so many system requirements. On the street, the Croatian kids learn about diversity and how to be assertive. Possibly, some players from Croatia as a result would not make it onto the German national team. In addition, many Croatian players, when they were children, did not have everything served up to them, likely a result of the difficult circumstances after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia. From the outset they had to fight in order to achieve something.

Beyond this, when looking back at the semi-finals, one must see how England got this far. They did not have the toughest opponents, but I am convinced that this young English side will also be playing an important role in tournaments to come. England's work in developing young players is top-rate, and now an increasing number of English professionals are playing for the top Premier League clubs, something that benefits the national team.

Belgium also had a chance to make it to the final of this World Cup. I believe that with this "golden generation" of players we can continue to keep an eye on Belgium for the next one or two tournaments. Especially because they also do good work developing new talent. In the semi-finals, Belgium came up against a young but steady French team which, after their set-piece goal, played very cleverly. They no longer play "Oh la-la football" because coach Didier Deschamps has instilled in them a sense of discipline, tactical unity and strong one-on-one play. This applies even to difficult players like Paul Pogba.

This discipline and steadiness, to which N'Golo Kante contributes a great deal, helps the French make full use of their quality. Similar to the English, the French still have a strong future, possibly even with better prospects. France and England will pose the crème de la crème of world football over the next six to eight years. Especially because they have applied the formula for success to their game: It is no longer about possession, but rather about pace. France and England have the ball artists who can create space with their dribbling. They are already top-notch in terms of playing prowess.

It is the speed factor that favours the French in the final against Croatia. Likewise their compactness which they demonstrated against Belgium in the semi-finals. Still, the Croatians can come up with an answer, as they showed against England. If Croatia can once again dig deep and come up with everything they have, then they have a chance to win the final. But one thing is clear to me: France are the favourites entering the match.

This applies as well to Belgium in the consolation match against England. And I think the Belgians want to reward themselves for a well-played World Cup. In my view, Belgium also played the most attractive football at this tournament. But I also like the team from Morocco. It played fast and self-confidently, and was the better team in the group play against Iran, Portugal and Spain. It was fun to watch a supposedly smaller team. Morocco only lacked the penetrating power.

Russia, with its fighting power, impressed people and so contributed to the good atmosphere at this tournament. France was the most complete team – and so is the favourite to win the title.

It still can't be said with any finality as to who is this World Cup's best player. It depends on how the final goes and in turn, whether, for example, Croatia's Luka Modric gets the Golden Ball and possibly later on is even named World Player of the Year – or else French star Kylian Mbappe. In return, there are not only two or three candidates, but also such players as Eden Hazard and Kevin De Bruyne proved their world-class abilities. This time around, it will not be the number of goals that will be of decisive importance for winning such honours.

What is certain, in my view, is that there will be a changing of the guard.