

# World Praises Iran for 'Heroic' Performance Against Spain

TEHRAN (IFP) - The Iranian national football team lost its Wednesday match against Spain 1-0 while many football fans across the world believed it deserved at least a draw against former world champions in their second match in FIFA World Cup 2018.

Iran and Spain rounded off Matchday 2 in Group B, with La Roja securing a 1-0 win to record their first victory at the 2018 FIFA World Cup Russia.

Iran fought a valiant battle in Kazan to maintain hopes of qualifying for the last 16. Despite dominating possession, Spain were unable to forge any clear cut openings as an iron-willed Iranian XI camped on the edge of their box, giving them plenty of positives to take into their next game against Portugal on June 25.

Fernando Hierro made two changes to Spain's starting line-up following their opening match against Portugal, as Dani Carvajal and Lucas Vazquez respectively replaced Nacho and Koke.

However, the Iberians struggled to break down a reshuffled Iranian



defence that included Majid Hosseini in place of the injured Roozbeh Cheshmi. Indeed, Spain's first clear opening did not arrive until around the half-hour mark, when David Silva went close with a sideways scissor kick, before narrowly missing the target again just before the break with a deflected shot.

The second half started brightly and Gerard Pique, earning his 100th cap for Spain, had a chance from a corner before Sergio

Busquets tried his luck from the edge of the penalty area.

Team Melli had a sight of goal at the other end of the pitch in the 53rd minute, but Karim Ansarifard's shot could only brush the side netting.

Spain took the lead with their next attack a minute later, the ball ricocheting into the net off Diego Costa, who registered his third goal in two matches. The Atletico Madrid striker required another stroke of luck on 54 minutes

when his shot came off Ramin Rezaeian to beat Beiranvand after he had been sent through by Andres Iniesta.

Iran grew more adventurous after falling behind and Mehdi Taremi almost levelled matters with a header that flew just over.

The entire Iranian bench poured onto the pitch when Saeed Ezatollahi fired an equalizer for Team Melli just before the hour. But the thousands of Iranian supporters that filled the stadium with the sound of vuvuzelas were left disappointed when it was ruled out for offside.

Iran initially set out to sit deep and play on the counter but were forced to change their tactics after Spain scored. They created a number of chances but were unable to convert any, leaving them ruing a dropped point.

Spain, on the other hand, picked up a narrow win before going into their final Group B fixture against Morocco. Hierro's charges went up against a well-organized side with a solid backline, but took all three points thanks to their experienced midfielders.

# Salah, Neymar, Messi, Messi, Messi: World Cup Stars Stifled

SARANSK (Dispatches) - With nagging injuries, heavy marking from opponents and some simply uninspired play, the top stars of the 2018 World Cup have struggled to deliver on the impossible expectations they carried into the tournament, with one prominent Portuguese exception.

Aside from Cristiano Ronaldo, who has all four of Portugal's goals in its two games, many of the biggest names are off to a shaky start.

No one has had rougher treatment from the opposition than the world's priciest player, Neymar.

During Brazil's opening 1-1 draw with Switzerland, the 26-year-old was fouled 10 times, the highest number on a single player in a single match since the 1998 World Cup, when England's Alan Shearer took 11 challenges against Tunisia.

Overall, Switzerland fouled Brazil 19 times, with little intervention from the referee, and it worked -- especially on Neymar.

Brazilians suggested their opponents were too violent; Swiss midfielder Gelson Fernandes thinks Neymar has another problem.

"He just falls too much," Fernandes said after the game in Rostov-on-Don.

"Out of these 10, only seven or eight were fouls. We have to stop their star, and he is the star."

Neymar felt the effects of the Swiss strategy long after Sunday's match ended, limping out of training Tuesday as he continues to recover from a foot injury he picked up before the tournament.

Superstar Lionel Messi did face heavy marking too, but he also had two uninspired performances for Argentina, which is now on the verge of early elimination after a 3-0 defeat against Croatia.

Throughout the matches against Iceland and Croatia, disciplined defenders and midfielders stopped Messi from making his famous runs and getting one-on-one chances.

Against Iceland, Messi saw his penalty spot kick saved by goalkeeper Hannes Halldorsson, and the game ended 1-1.

Against Croatia, he crumbled with the rest of the team, which now desperately needs to beat Nigeria in the last round

of group stage to have a chance of advancing to the next phase.

"Messi is human," Aguero said after the Iceland match.

"Sometimes things happen for a reason. We need to be with him. This was a bad day, but he can decide a match at any given moment. Hope he is better against Croatia."

Croatia was taking note.

"You can't stop him with one player, you have to defend like a team. You saw that with Iceland," defender Dejan Lovren said ahead of the Argentina clash late Thursday.

Egypt striker Mohamed Salah set a Premier League scoring record for Liverpool and held all the hopes for a deep run by the Pharaohs in their return to the World Cup, until he injured his shoulder playing for Liverpool in the Champions League final in a clash with Real Madrid's Sergio Ramos, of Spain.

Salah sat out the opening 0-1 loss to Uruguay in Yekaterinburg, with coach Hector Cuper hoping to have him fit for Egypt's second match, against Russia.

He made his World Cup debut in St. Petersburg and scored from the penalty spot, but only after the hosts led by three goals, and his mobility was clearly affected.

He barely touched the ball in the first half and avoided physical contact with Russian defenders during the entire game, and Egypt was eliminated with one match left to play.

Ronaldo isn't entirely alone in starting strong. Diego Costa has three of Spain's four goals, Harry Kane has both of England's, and Luka Modric scored one goal and set up the other in Croatia's 2-0 win over Nigeria.

And there's plenty of time for others to turn things around. Kylian Mbappe, the 19-year-old striker at the center of the second-most expensive transfer in history, managed just one chance in France's 2-1 win over Australia in Kazan, but scored Thursday against Peru in front of an empty net.

His famous runs and dribbles, however, were blocked by Australia's physical game.

It's early, and the tournament has seen plenty of stellar play from lesser-known players, but many of the star scorers have work to do.

## Croatia Crush Argentina 3-0 to Reach Knockouts



The Real Madrid midfielder scored a superb goal and had 62 touches, making 29 passes in the opposition half - the most by a Croatia player - with an accuracy of 82.8%

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Argentina are facing the prospect of an early World Cup exit after a dreadful error from goalkeeper Willy Caballero set Croatia on their way to victory and a place in the last 16.

On a night when so much was expected of Argentina captain Lionel Messi, Caballero made the most telling contribution to his team's fate with an attempted chip over Ante Rebic that backfired badly, allowing the striker to volley into an exposed net in the 53rd minute.

Messi - adrift for much of the match, especially during a pedestrian opening half - rallied his side, but neither he nor substitute forwards Gonzalo Higuain and Pablo Dybala could find a way through in Nizhny Novgorod.

The closest Messi came was a half-chance, a snatch at a rebound from a Maximiliano Meza shot which was blocked by Ivan Rakitic and turned behind to safety.

second-half display from Croatia, illuminated by a moment of magic from their own masterful number 10, Luka Modric.

His curled shot from range drifted beautifully beyond Caballero's dive to put his side two ahead, before Rakitic's injury-time tap-in sealed a victory that moves the Europeans through to the knockout stage and also leaves them in a strong position to win the group.

Argentina are no longer in control of their own destiny. This defeat follows their opening 1-1 draw with Iceland, in which Messi missed a penalty, and now even a heavy win over Nigeria in their final game on Tuesday may not be enough to send them through to the next round.

For Messi, a prolific performer at club level with Barcelona, this was another harrowing chapter in his recent history of pain and disappointment in the international game.

## Brazil Beat Costa Rica 2-0 at World Cup



ST. PETERSBURG, Russia (AP) - After more than 90 minutes of aggravation and exasperation, Neymar and Brazil finally broke through Costa Rica's smothering defense.

Philippe Coutinho scored in the first minute of stoppage time, and Neymar followed six minutes later to give Brazil a 1-0 victory over Costa Rica on

Friday at the World Cup. Unlike Argentina and Lionel Messi, Brazil is still in a good position to advance to the round of 16. Costa Rica has been eliminated.

Neymar dropped to his knees after the final whistle, sobbing in his hands as his teammates surrounded him and then lifted him off the ground.

## Djokovic Thrashes Dimitrov to Lay Down Marker

LONDON (Reuters) - Novak Djokovic has issued a statement of intent as he thrashed second seed Grigor Dimitrov to reach the quarter-finals of the ATP 500 Fever-Tree championships at Queen's Club.

The unseeded 12-time Grand Slam champion produced a clinical display to win 6-4 6-1 and claim his first victory over a top-10 opponent since last May.

While Djokovic's dominance was based on his trademark pinpoint accuracy and elastic court-coverage, Australian Nick Kyrgios was at his idiosyncratic best earlier on a sunny center court to beat home hope Kyle Edmund 7-6(7) 6-7(5) 6-3.

Kyrgios mixed brutal power with outrageous shot-making, sending down 32 aces and several between-the-legs specials to the delight of the

crowd. The 23-year-old will next face defending champion Feliciano Lopez in the quarter-finals.

Djokovic, ranked 22 after more than a year battling an elbow injury and indifferent form, arrived in London after a bitter end to his French Open hopes against unheralded Italian Marco Cecchinato, but has so far looked serene on the grass courts.

He always looked in control against world number five Dimitrov and took the first set when he broke in the 10th game having gone 0-40 ahead on the Bulgarian's serve.

Dimitrov saved two set points but at 30-40 double-faulted to hand Djokovic the opener.

After that Dimitrov faded badly and Djokovic surged into a 5-1 lead before having difficulty clinching victory.

## Hamilton, Bottas Fastest During 1st French GP Practice



Ferrari driver Kimi Raikkonen of Finland steers his car during the first free practice at the Paul Ricard racetrack, in Le Castellet, southern France, Friday, June 22, 2018.

LE CASTELLET, France (AP) - Lewis Hamilton and Mercedes teammate Valtteri Bottas posted the top two times during the opening practice for Formula One's French Grand Prix on Friday.

Defending champion Hamilton clocked the best lap time at 0.140 seconds faster than Bottas.

Red Bulls' Daniel Ricciardo had the third best effort, followed by Ferrari pair Kimi Raikkonen and Sebastian Vettel.

Vettel leads Hamilton by one point atop the standings after seven of 21

races.

The session had one red flag near the end when Marcus Ericsson spun out of control and slammed into the barrier on Turn 11. The right rear of his Sauber burst into flame before the Swede got out, apparently unharmed.

This was the first chance drivers had to run on the 5.8-kilometer (3.6-mile) Paul Ricard Circuit, as F1 makes its return to France for the first time in a decade.

There will be two more practices later on Friday and on Saturday before qualifying for Sunday's race.