

Africa's Moment in the Sun



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GAUTAM BHATTACHARYYA

From Roger Milla's Cameroon to Asamoah Gyan's Ghana, the FIFA World Cup has been a tale of promise and heartbreak for the football powerhouses of the dark continent. They have wowed football fans with their style, grace, athleticism, inventiveness and sheer physicality and yet always, always come short at this showpiece event. In the first three decades of the World Cup, which was launched in 1930, only Egypt from Africa made it to the World Cup finals (1934). FIFA refused to guarantee a slot for Africa till 1970. It took a boycott by African nations of the World Cup in England (1966) before FIFA relented. But even in 2022 only five African nations were allowed to compete; the number is set to go up to nine in 2026.

Since 1930, only 13 African nations have played in the World Cup and just three of them have reached the quarterfinal stage—the last eight—namely Cameroon (1990), Senegal (2002) and Ghana (2010). Had more African nations played earlier, the probability of one of them lifting the cup would have been higher.

African countries have often flattered in the past to eventually fade away. Nigeria the 'Super Eagles' captivated the football world with their reserves of stamina, power, speed and skill throughout the 1990s but has seen their influence wane. They did not progress beyond the second round ('94, '98 and 2014), but produced a number of shockers along the way, beating Bulgaria, Greece and coming close to beating Diego Maradona's Argentina. They also dominated and came close to beating the Azzurri, but the Italians' experience eventually proved decisive.

In an interview with this writer during World Cup Russia 2018, Emeke Ezeugo, who had played in Kolkata maiden before wearing the Nigeria colours, didn't mince his words. Asked if the divide between Africa, Asia (they have produced only one semi-finalist in South Korea in 2002) and Europe could ever be bridged, Ezeugo did some plain speaking.

"The divide can never be bridged because of the corruption so deeply embedded in African and Asian football. A cartel runs Asian and African football and they operate in tandem with CAF and AFC and development of football is non-existent in these two continents," he said.

Emeka, who is now a qualified coach in the US, observed: "In Nigeria, the game has been deteriorating tremendously and Fifa has never bothered to promote independent organisations that are not in local football association's control." In any case, the fact remains it's a tough climb for youngsters taking to the game there, often as an escape route from poverty and drugs.

Two of Africa's iconic figures—Abedi Ayew 'Pele' of Ghana and George Weah of Liberia never figured in the World Cup finals as their countries failed to qualify for the showpiece. Abedi earned the nickname 'Pele' for his stature and long playing career as a star performer. He was adjudged African Footballer of the Year for three years on the trot between 1991 and 1993 and plied his trade in Germany, Italy, France and later in the Middle East.

Weah, almost a peer of Abedi, was another larger-than-life footballer from Liberia and a two-time African Footballer of the Year. The former Liberian captain left a significant footprint in clubs like AS Monaco, Paris St. Germain and AC Milan, topping it up with Fifa World Player of the Year in 1995—the first African to win the highest individual award in the world football.

Moving onto Premier League at the turn of the new millennium, Weah was also an FA Cup winner with Chelsea, before he retired in 2003 to pursue his political ambitions and went on to become the President of his country. Replying to an obvious question if

he missed playing his part at the World Cup finals, a candid Weah once told Fifa's official website: "Of course I would have liked to play at the World Cup, but I achieved so much in my career as a footballer that I can't have any complaints."

Africa nations have for long been leading exporters of footballing talent across the world—be it the top drawer leagues in Europe to amateur leagues in Kolkata and Kerala. Remember the likes of Chima Okorie or Chibuzor, who came to India primarily as students or the likes of Emeke himself or Suley Musah of Ghana?

Many or most African nations were colonised by European powers before gaining independence. Morocco was ruled by France till as recently as 1956 and had been ruled by both Spain and Portugal earlier. Beating Belgium, Spain and Portugal on their way to the semi-final to play France, therefore, would have been cathartic. This colonial past also explains why a large number of African footballers migrate to Europe to play and prosper.

Morocco's Achraf Hakimi has played for Real Madrid, Borussia Dortmund and Inter Milan, before moving to Paris Saint Germain. Hakim Ziyech, also from Morocco's dream team this year, plays for Chelsea in the English Premier League. Sofyan Amrabat played for

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Netherlands before opting for Morocco as a full international. Mazraoui has played for Bayern, Munich. Several other players on the team were born in Morocco but played for European clubs. Youssef En-Nesyri has spent his entire professional career in Spain.

When two Moroccan teenagers meet, the first question they often ask each other is "Barça o Real?" Moroccan cafes often identify as either Barcelona or Real Madrid; Moroccans play a weekly lottery guessing the results of Spain's La Liga. Moroccan dish couscous is now part of French cuisine.

Morocco, whose national team are called the Atlas Lions, dared to dream and the results followed. The dapper coach Walid Regragui's men did not believe in setting a bar to their dreams like making the second round or quarter final as the France-born former national captain, who took charge of the team barely three months back, announced:

"We are the Rocky in this tournament", referring to the film franchise celebrating the quintessential underdog story.

"The others won't give it to us...The big European countries, they like to be themselves and win the World Cup," Regragui said in the media conference after gatecrashing into the semi-finals. He had certainly hit the nail on the head as despite the occasional upsets caused by the African and Asian qualifiers, the 'greatest show on earth' had essentially remained the domain of the football aristocracy so far, comprising of the European superpowers and Latin American heavyweights Brazil and Argentina.

Will the Qatar 2022 then mark a watershed moment in the history of the World Cup? If Morocco epitomised it with wins in the first round against Belgium, Canada, then former champions Spain and Portugal in the knockout; it was Saudi Arabia who

unleashed the mayhem with that upset win over Argentina, Japan's crucial wins over Germany and Spain, respectively.

There is no gainsaying that the gap between the so-called superpowers and minnows have narrowed, but for Morocco, it has not happened overnight. The African nations have, historically, been the exporters of some of the greatest talents in the game, but barring the likes of a Milla, Gyan or El-Hadji Diouf, they have not been able to showcase themselves on the biggest stage of the game.

This is where the Moroccan story, built largely around their diaspora talent, is a different one with both Africa and the Pan Arab world claiming a share to their glory. The North African country, who rejoined the African Union in 2017 after breaking away for 33 years (in protest against the Organisation of African Unity's recognition of Western Sahara), fancy themselves more as Africans even though more than 90 per cent of the population are actually Sunni Muslims.

What also makes Morocco unique is that it has been a sort of rainbow nation in that part of the world, with a footballing prowess which owes a lot to immigration over the years. As many as 16 of Morocco's 26-player squad were either born or raised in a foreign country. Leading the way was Regragui himself, who was born in Paris before captaining Morocco's national team and later taking charge.

A recent news report says that over 100 players in this World Cup were representing countries other than that of their birth, but few had seen the diaspora playing such a key role behind supplying their key performers. Hakimi Ziyech, full back Noussair Mazraoui and midfielder Sofyan Amrabat were born in the Netherlands. Achraf Hakimi was born in Spain, joining Real Madrid's youth set up by the age of six while goalkeeper Youssef Bounou is of Canadian ancestry. Captain Romain Saiss, along with winger Sofiane Boufal, were born in France.

The situation was, however, different ahead of Russia 2018 when after qualifying for the World Cup finals, Frenchman Herve Renard—who became a cult figure of sorts in Qatar when his team Saudi Arabia stunned Argentina—was their erstwhile coach and found it difficult to stitch together a decent team.

Morocco ought to be grateful to the crusade of Munir El-Haddadi, a Spain-born Moroccan footballer, who had turned out for the Europeans for a single match in 2014. It was El-Haddadi's pleading with the Moroccan national body to let him play for his country of origin which eventually saw Fifa changing the eligibility rules to a minimum of three appearances in 2020.

It's a pity that Morocco could never really see the best of El-Haddadi as he was past his prime. However, in leading the charge to get the rules changed, Morocco showed how reliant they have been on migrants and naturalised foreign citizens for the success of the national team.

Another piece of statistic will make it clear about how seriously Morocco take football as a vehicle to reach out to the world—they have bid for every World Cup finals from 1994 to the 2026, albeit without success.

Add to this is their state-of-the-art football training centre named after the king which was launched in 2009, the largest in Africa and being used by all of Morocco's national teams as well as other neighbouring countries. Built at a reported cost of \$65 million, the Mohammed VI Football Academy was set up to groom players and four players in Qatar were its products.

"When you work, you are patient the results will show on the pitch," an upbeat Regragui said after they entered the quarter finals in Qatar. Point taken, as the results show that Hakimi & Co are have reaped the results of the country's vision and intent to give shape to an African dream! ■



Roger Milla (Cameroon)

The figure of Roger Milla breaking into his trademark gig near the corner flag to celebrate goals is possibly what most fans remember when thinking of African stars in the World Cup. Milla, who was actually brought back from retirement at the behest of president Paul Biya, scored four goals in Italia '90 when they became the first African country to make to the quarter finals. They lost 3-2 to England and many felt that they might have gone further with better discipline and a bit more experience on the international stage. In US 1994 Milla was the oldest player to ever appear at a World Cup, a record that was beaten by Colombian Faryd Mondragón (43) in 2014 and Egypt's Essam El Hadary (45) in 2018.



The Fab Five

El-Hadji Diouf (Senegal)

He played in only one World Cup, but was one of the main architects of the team progressing to the quarter finals of the 2002 World Cup under the coaching of Frenchman Bruno Metsu.

Diouf's artistry and goal-scoring abilities were so good that he was included in the All Star XI for the tournament as he orchestrated wins over France and Sweden and draws with Denmark and Uruguay, the latter a 3-3 thriller.

They eventually lost 1-0 to Turkey in extra-time but the legend of Diouf was cemented and he later joined Liverpool following the tournament.



Rigobert Song (Cameroon)

The coach of the Cameroon national side in Qatar is also a legend, earning 137 caps. He appeared in four WC finals, the first one being at USA 94 when he was something of a surprise call-up at the age of 17 but ended up playing in the group games against Sweden and Brazil. His red card against the latter meant he was the youngest player to be sent off at a World Cup.

He was back at France '98 but his red card in that tournament against Chile meant he became the first player to be sent off at two World Cup finals, a dubious feat matched later by Zinedine Zidane. He made it to the team at South Africa in 2010, making him the only player to have played in 1994 as well.



Asamoah Gyan (Ghana)

The talismanic Ghana striker boasts of six goals in World Cup finals but will possibly always be remembered for his crucial penalty miss in the quarter finals shootout against Uruguay at the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. A costly miss which may have denied the Black Stars a historic place in the semi-finals.

Gyan really rose to prominence in the qualifiers for the 2006 World Cup, where he scored a crucial winner against the Czech Republic and impressed with his all-round showing. He was even better in 2010, scoring against Serbia, Australia and the United States as Ghana got to the brink of the semis, only to be denied on penalties by Uruguay. Luis Suarez's handball had given Gyan the chance to put his team into the next stage from 12-yards but he missed the kick. He grabbed two more World Cup goals in Brazil 2014, netting against eventual champions Germany and Portugal but Ghana disappointed with an early exit.

Samuel Eto'o (Cameroon)

He was only 15 when he made his international debut in 1997 and at 16 years, he was the youngest participant at France '98. He was more established in the side at his next appearance in 2002 and netted a winner against Saudi Arabia, though it proved a disappointing tournament for the Indomitable Lions.

After missing the 2006 World Cup, Eto'o was back in South Africa four years later and scored against Denmark and Netherlands in the group stage. His last World Cup was at Brazil 2014, when he became the third African player along with compatriots Song and Jacques Song'o to play in four World Cup finals. Eto'o hung his boots in 2019 and is currently the president of the Cameroon Football Federation.

