

Football, one of the most competitive and captivating sports in the world, profoundly impacts social, economic, and cultural spheres. Beyond the matches themselves, football serves as a unifying force, bringing people together across borders and fostering a sense of pride and identity for nations. The global stage of football transcends mere competition, becoming a platform where nations strive to assert their strength, skill, and character through their national teams, inspiring millions and leaving lasting legacies.

In this presentation, I will share insights from my thesis, focusing on the extraordinary achievements of Croatia and Morocco in recent FIFA World Cups. Despite not being traditional football powerhouses, these teams defied expectations, with Croatia reaching the final in 2018 and Morocco making history as the first African team to reach the semi-finals in 2022. These remarkable feats captured the world's attention, highlighting not only their skill but also their resilience, tactical intelligence, and ability to adapt against some of the strongest teams in the world.

This study delves into the tactical strategies, coaching approaches, and structural preparations employed by these teams during the 2018 and 2022 World Cups. It examines how competition structures, including the diversity of playing styles and the physical and psychological demands of the tournament, influence team performance. By analyzing the interplay between these factors, this research sheds light on the critical elements that enable non-traditional teams to compete and succeed at the highest level, offering valuable lessons for coaches, players, and football enthusiasts worldwide.

Key words : FIFA World Cup, Knockout Stages.

Introduction

This study seeks to analyze the impact of team cohesion, mental resilience, and squad depth on the success of national teams in international competitions, particularly the FIFA World Cup. Unlike club tournaments, the World Cup presents unique challenges, including facing unfamiliar opposition, adapting to diverse playing styles, navigating tight schedules, and enduring the high-pressure environment of knockout stages. These factors test not only the physical capabilities of the players but also the collective psychological fortitude of the team.

The research underscores that successful teams depend not only on the brilliance of star players but also on the strength of a cohesive unit capable of maintaining consistent

performance under extreme conditions. Team cohesion fosters effective communication, trust, and a shared sense of purpose, enabling players to adapt quickly to the dynamic demands of high-stakes matches. Mental resilience is equally critical, as players and teams must recover from setbacks, handle the stress of penalty shootouts, and perform in front of global audiences with unwavering focus.

Additionally, the study delves into the importance of squad depth, emphasizing the value of having a bench of qualitatively comparable substitutes who can seamlessly integrate into the team's tactical framework. This is particularly vital in the later stages of the tournament when fatigue, injuries, and suspensions can disrupt the starting lineup. A deep and versatile squad ensures continuity in performance, enabling teams to maintain balance and implement strategic adjustments without compromising their effectiveness.

By examining these factors holistically, the study aims to provide insights into how national teams can build competitive advantages in international tournaments, where the margin for error is minimal, and the demands for physical, tactical, and psychological excellence are at their peak.

Methods

Data Collection and Analysis

1. Data Collection

Match Video Analysis

Match footage from the FIFA World Cup tournaments in 2018 and 2022 was analyzed to gain detailed insights into the tactical strategies, formations, and in-game adjustments made by coaches. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of team performance trends, individual player contributions, and the effectiveness of different tactical approaches across matches and stages of the tournament.

Statistical Data Analysis

Quantitative metrics were collected and evaluated, including possession rates, passing accuracy percentages, shots on target, saves, and other key performance indicators. These statistics provide a numerical foundation to compare the performance of teams, identify patterns, and measure the impact of specific tactical decisions on match outcomes.

Coach Interviews and Statements

Post-match interviews, pre-tournament press conferences, and other public statements by coaches were reviewed to understand their perspectives on team readiness, game strategies, and objectives. These insights were cross-referenced with observed tactical implementations during matches to evaluate the alignment between stated intentions and actual performance.

2. Qualitative Methods

Content Analysis

A qualitative content analysis was conducted to evaluate coaching comments and interviews. This involved categorizing insights from coaches into themes such as team readiness, objectives, and strategic decision-making. By aligning these themes with tactical observations from match footage, the study aimed to contextualize coaching approaches and provide a nuanced understanding of how off-field decisions translate to on-field performance. The analysis also considered variations in coaching philosophy based on cultural and competitive contexts.

3. Quantitative Analysis

Microsoft Excel was employed for the quantitative analysis of the collected data. The analysis focused on identifying patterns and trends in performance metrics across teams and tournaments. Match results were systematically analyzed to determine defensive performance by evaluating the number of goals conceded by teams that advanced to the Round of 16.

Teams were analyzed based on the number of matches played: first across four games (Group Stage + Round of 16) and then across five games (Group Stage + Round of 16 + Quarterfinal). Only teams that reached the respective stages were included in each subset. Two chart representations were created to visualize the findings—one for teams that played four games and another for those that played five games.

The statistical functions of Excel, including sorting and charting tools, facilitated the comparison and visualization of defensive performance, providing insights into the correlation between team progression and defensive stability. This approach ensured data-driven conclusions that complemented qualitative observations, offering a comprehensive perspective on team performance.

This multi-faceted approach to data collection and analysis integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods, ensuring a comprehensive examination of coaching strategies and their impact on team success in international competitions.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant role of tactical adaptability, team cohesion, and mental resilience in the success of underdog teams like Croatia and Morocco in the FIFA World Cups. These results emphasize that while traditional football powerhouses often benefit from superior resources and depth in squad talent, smaller nations can bridge this gap through strategic innovation and psychological fortitude.

Croatia's journey to the 2018 World Cup final reflects their ability to leverage collective experience and tactical versatility. As noted in prior research, teams with a mature roster often exhibit stronger synchronization between technical-tactical execution and physical performance. Croatia's midfield dominance, led by players like Luka Modrić, showcased an exceptional ability to control tempo and dictate play under pressure, enabling them to compete against stronger squads in extended matches, including penalty shootouts.

Morocco's unprecedented achievement in reaching the 2022 World Cup semi-finals underscores the importance of defensive organization and cohesive teamwork. Their ability to execute a low-block defense while capitalizing on counterattacks exemplifies how a well-structured tactical plan can compensate for disparities in individual talent. Furthermore, the injury challenges faced by key Moroccan players, including two center-backs in critical matches, highlight the resilience and adaptability of the squad.

The comparative lack of squad depth for both teams, particularly evident in the later stages of the tournaments, reflects a developmental disparity compared to traditional powerhouses. This limitation reinforces the notion that physical conditioning and injury prevention are critical for sustained success. Cohesiveness, as identified in Carron et al.'s research, played a pivotal role in mitigating the effects of these challenges, as both teams relied heavily on mutual trust and synchronized efforts to achieve their goals.

Interestingly, both Croatia and Morocco exhibited strategic flexibility in utilizing possession and counterattacks to manage physical demands. Studies, such as Lorenzo-Martinez et al.

(2021), have documented the correlation between possession-based strategies and reduced physical exertion. Croatia's control in midfield and Morocco's disciplined defensive structure demonstrate that tactical planning can preserve energy while maintaining competitiveness.

These findings suggest that coaches and teams aiming to replicate such success should adopt training methods that balance technical, tactical, and physical development. For youth players, integrating foundational skills with progressive tactical training can lay the groundwork for resilience and adaptability at the senior level. For senior squads, fostering a culture of cohesion and readiness to adapt to situational challenges is paramount.

Future research could further explore how underdog teams adapt to high-pressure scenarios, incorporating variables such as psychological resilience, leadership dynamics, and recovery strategies. Expanding the scope to include diverse tactical formations and situational factors, such as match density and environmental conditions, could provide deeper insights into the determinants of success for non-traditional footballing nations.

Study Limitations

While tactical adaptability and defensive organization proved effective for Croatia and Morocco, these strategies often falter when facing opponents who employ similar approaches. A clash between two defensively-oriented or counterattack-focused teams tends to neutralize the strengths of both sides, leading to matches where the outcome hinges on isolated moments rather than consistent tactical superiority.

For instance, when both teams prioritize maintaining a compact shape and minimizing risks, the match can become stagnant, with limited opportunities for either side to capitalize on open play. This was evident in matches where teams of similar styles faced off like in the match between Morocco and Croatia in the group stage of Qatar world cup (Morocco 0-0 Croatia), resulting in lower goal-scoring opportunities and an increased reliance on set pieces, penalties, or individual brilliance to determine the winner.

Moreover, the effectiveness of a counterattacking strategy depends on the opponent's willingness to dominate possession and leave spaces in their defensive setup. Against teams that sit back and adopt a cautious approach, counterattacking opportunities are significantly reduced, forcing teams like Croatia and Morocco to take the initiative in possession. This shift in tactical responsibility can expose vulnerabilities, as these teams may lack the same level of

creativity and technical proficiency in breaking down deep defensive blocks compared to traditional football powerhouses.

Another limitation arises from the predictability of such approaches in tournaments where teams have ample time to analyze and prepare. Opponents can preemptively adjust their game plans to nullify the counterattacking threat by maintaining defensive discipline and minimizing turnovers in dangerous areas. The lack of squad depth, particularly in teams like Morocco, exacerbates this issue, as the physical and mental toll of repeatedly executing such a demanding style becomes apparent in later stages of the competition.

Conclusion

Croatia and Morocco's success in the World Cup demonstrated the critical role of resilience—both mental and physical—as well as strong team cohesion. Despite not being traditional powerhouses, both teams defied expectations through tactical adaptability and collective spirit. Croatia's journey to the 2018 final and Morocco's semi-final run in 2022 were fueled by remarkable teamwork and mental fortitude, with each team managing to neutralize stronger opponents through tactical discipline.

However, as the tournaments progressed, their lack of squad depth became apparent. Fatigue and injuries, especially in the later rounds, highlighted the limitations of relying heavily on a small group of core players. Croatia, for example, struggled to maintain their intensity in the final against France, while Morocco faced similar challenges in their semi-final clash with France due to key injuries. These experiences underline that while adaptability and cohesion are vital, a deep and well-rounded squad is essential for sustaining peak performance in high-pressure tournaments like the World Cup.

In summary, the success of Croatia and Morocco shows that resilience and tactical flexibility are crucial, but squad depth remains a key factor for long-term success in such demanding competitions.