

Morocco, Croatia fight for third place

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The Daily Morning Voice Online Desk: To some, it's little more than a meaningless exhibition match. To others, it's a chance to become "immortal." The third-place playoff at the World Cup can be a confusing concept. "You are so disappointed, you've just lost a semifinal and then two days later you have to go back out there," Morocco coach Walid Regragui said Friday. Regragui's history-making team – the first African nation to reach the World Cup semifinals – will play Croatia on Saturday at Khalifa International Stadium, reports AP. "It's like the booby prize," Regragui said. "I am sorry for speaking like this. I understand that it should be important, I understand that it is better to finish third than fourth, but for me my takeaway is that we just didn't get to the final."

Morocco's run to the semifinals in Qatar provided the most improbable story of the tournament. The team was also the first Arab nation to go so far in soccer's biggest event, generating an outpouring of pride among Arab countries. After such a wild and dizzying ride, it's understandable that Regragui sounded so flat when looking ahead to the match against Croatia. It's also a measure of his own ambition that he ends an unforgettable tournament for African soccer with a sense of disappointment after being beaten by defending champion France 2-0. "Yes, finishing third would be great for our image. We would be on the podium," the coach said. "But you know what, even if we win the game tomorrow we won't have got to the final and we won't have won the World Cup." The atmosphere from the Croatian side has been more upbeat.

The runners-up from the last World Cup in Russia lost to Argentina 3-0 in the other semifinal match, but their players have spoken of the importance of winning another medal. Forward Andrej Kramarić described it as the chance to "become an immortal hero in your country." "Eight of us from (the tournament in) Russia understand that feeling of winning a medal at the World Cup and we have a lot of players who haven't experienced that and would love to do that because it's something that will stay with you for the rest of their life," Kramarić said.

Luka Modrić, who is likely playing in his last World Cup, had similar thoughts. "We need to leave everything to win the bronze medal and let our fans celebrate one more time," he said. To finish second and third in back-to-back World Cups would further secure the legacy of a golden generation for Croatia. "Saturday's match is not a small one for us, but a big final, a fight for third place, for a medal," Croatia coach Zlatko Dalić said. "We have to prepare in every sense. It's a big thing if we take the bronze medal, that would be great. "The difference is being third or fourth in the world, we will do everything to do that."

Morocco and Croatia have already played each other at this year's World Cup, a 0-0 draw in the group stage. "We know that Croatia got a lot of stick because they weren't able to beat Morocco," Regragui said. "Morocco was one of the underdogs and now we both reached the semifinals." Injured Morocco center back Romain Saiss, the team's captain, will miss the game after lasting only 21 minutes against France. Noussair Mazraoui, also substituted in that match, is a doubt. "We have really, really pushed our players to the limits, but they still want to go out tomorrow and play again," Regragui said. "But we are not going to be taking risks tomorrow for some of our players."