

Belgium crash out after Croatia draw

Belgium went out of the tournament at the group stage after the substitute Romelu Lukaku missed a series of late chances

● **Croatia advance to the last 16 from Group F alongside Morocco after stalemate**

AFP

Romelu Lukaku missed a string of late chances as Belgium crashed out of the World Cup in the group stage after a 0-0 draw with Croatia yesterday which sent the 2018 runners-up into the knockout phase.

Croatia had a penalty award controversially cancelled by VAR early in a largely uneventful first half.

The introduction of Lukaku at the interval changed the game, but he was guilty of three dreadful misses as Zlatko Dalić's side rode their luck to hold on.

Croatia progressed as runners-up in Group F behind winners Morocco who beat Canada 2-1 to also qualify for the last 16.

Belgium, the world's second-ranked side, saw their run of reaching at least the quar-



Belgium's Romelu Lukaku, left, reacts after missing a chance to score

ter-finals at four straight major tournaments come to an abrupt end.

Roberto Martínez's men managed just one goal in the tournament in a fortunate opening 1-0 win over Canada.

Martínez dropped captain Eden Hazard to the bench as one of four changes which also saw Leandro Trossard and Dries Mertens start for the first time.

The build-up to the match had been dominated by rumours of

an altercation between senior Belgian players, involving Eden Hazard, which Martínez described as "fake news".

Croatia almost took the lead inside the first 10 seconds, as the ball was played forward to Ivan Perisic after kick-off and the Tottenham man cut inside and drilled a shot just wide of the far post.

The likelihood of Belgium needing to win was increased when Morocco scored an early

FIFA World Cup results

Canada	1 - 2	Morocco
Croatia	0 - 0	Belgium
Costa Rica	2 - 4	Germany
Japan	2 - 1	Spain

Today's matches

South Korea vs Portugal	6PM
Ghana vs Uruguay	6PM
Cameroon vs Brazil	10PM
Serbia vs Switzerland	10PM

goal. Yannick Carrasco had a chance to open the scoring but his shot was blocked.

Penalty overturned

Mertens curled over after a trademark Kevin De Bruyne run and pass, before Croatia were awarded a penalty seconds later when Carrasco tripped Andrej Kramaric in the box.

But the decision was overturned following a lengthy VAR check which decided that a tiny fraction of Dejan Lovren's shoulder was offside.

Desperate for a goal after a first half in which neither side mustered a shot on target, Martínez sent on Lukaku, Belgium's



YOU KNOW WHAT
Belgium, the world's second-ranked side, saw their run of reaching at least the quarter-finals at four straight major tournaments come to an abrupt end

record scorer, for Mertens at half-time.

They immediately carried more threat, with Lukaku, who struggled with injury in the build-up to the tournament, heading straight at Croatia goalkeeper Dominik Livakovic.

Thibaut Courtois was then called into action for the first time, stretching to tip over Mateo Kovacic's curling effort as the game opened up.

That also suited the Croatian

attackers though and Courtois had to twice get down to keep out low shots from Marcelo Brozovic and Luka Modric.

Belgium should have taken the lead on the hour mark.

Carrasco almost bundled the ball in but was denied by Livakovic, before Lukaku contrived to hit the post with the goal gaping on the rebound.

Lukaku was guilty of an even worse miss two minutes later, heading over an empty net from six yards out, although replays suggested the ball may have been out of play when De Bruyne crossed it in.

Martínez also threw on Thorgan Hazard, Youri Tielemans and Jeremy Doku as Belgium searched for that all important goal.

Lukaku saw another chance come and go in the 87th minute, deflecting the ball wide from Thomas Meunier's volley.

The striker, on loan at Inter Milan from Chelsea, still had another golden opportunity to be the hero, but he opted to chest the ball towards the open net from three yards out and directed it into the arms of Livakovic.

Morocco roar past Canada



Morocco's Youssef En-Nesyri scores his side's second goal

AFP

Morocco powered into the last 16 of the World Cup for the first time in 36 years yesterday with a 2-1 victory over eliminated Canada.

Goals from Hakim Ziyech and Youssef En-Nesyri ensured the North Africans finished top of Group F ahead of 2018 World Cup runners-up Croatia.

Morocco, who last reached the knockout stages of the World Cup in 1986, will face the runners-up from Group E in the last 16.

Canada's defeat meanwhile capped a disappointing World Cup for the CONCACAF side, who depart after losing all three of their group games on their long-awaited return to the finals.

Morocco put themselves firmly on course for the second round after upsetting Belgium 2-0 on Sunday, a result that left them needing only a point against Canada yesterday to be sure of advancing.

Achieving that objective never looked in doubt after the Moroccans grabbed the lead after only four minutes in front of 43,102 fans.

Canada captain and goalkeeper Milan Borjan raced off his line to clear an underhit



BETTER YOU KNOW
Morocco began its campaign with a morale-boosting draw against Croatia and then beat Belgium 2-0 for arguably its best result in international soccer

backpass from Steven Vitoria but could only watch in horror as the ball fell to Morocco's Ziyech.

The Chelsea star seized the opportunity ruthlessly, coolly lifting a finish over the stranded Borjan into the empty net for 1-0.

That early setback winded Canada, who struggled to gain any sort of a foothold against a rampant Morocco who were soon 2-0 up.

Right-back Achraf Hakimi's long ball caught the Canadian defence napping and En-Nesyri darted in behind before smashing home a finish at the near post to beat Borjan.

Germany out despite 4-2 win over Costa Rica

AFP

Germany was eliminated from the group stage of the World Cup for the second tournament in a row.

The four-time champions beat Costa Rica 4-2 Thursday but it wasn't enough to ad-

vance to the round of 16. Japan's 2-1 victory over Spain allowed both of those teams to advance instead, with the Japanese team at the top of the group.

Playing as defending champions at the last World Cup, Germany also exited early.



Germany's Serge Gnabry scores his side's opening goal

Japan roar back again to beat Spain and advance to last 16

Reuters

Japan staged their second stunning turnaround of the World Cup when they beat 2010 champions Spain 2-1 on Thursday with two quick-fire goals and advanced to the last 16 along with their beaten opponents.

Going into the halftime break 1-0 down and on course for an early World Cup exit, Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu reorganised his side to give them more attacking bite and within six minutes the Samurai Blue were ahead.

Ritsu Doan, one of the substi-



Japan's Ao Tanaka, second right, heads the ball to score his side's second goal

tutes, hammered in a shot from the edge of the box in the 48th minute that Spain goalkeeper

Unai Simon - whose poor clearance had created the danger - could not keep out.

Three minutes later, Ao Tanaka scored from close range after the other halftime sub Kaoru Mitoma cut the ball back from the byline.

The VAR system took several minutes to confirm the ball had not gone out before Mitoma's touch, sparking wild celebrations by Japan and their fans when the verdict came in.

Spain had looked in total control in the first half but were suddenly clinging to their chance of staying in the World Cup as Costa Rica and Germany battled out their own drama in the other Group E match.

Maradona would be 'super happy', says Messi

AFP

Lionel Messi believes Diego Maradona would be "super happy" after he led Argentina into the World Cup last 16 on Wednesday thanks to a 2-0 win over Poland.

Messi became his country's most capped player at the tournament with a 22nd appearance surpassing his legendary compatriot who died just over two years ago.

"I learned it recently, I didn't know it. It's a pleasure to be able to continue to achieve these kinds of records. I think Diego



Poland's Damian Szymanski, left, tries to stop Argentina's Lionel Messi

“I think Diego would be super happy for me, because he always showed me a lot of affection, he was always happy when things went well for me

DIEGO MARADONA

would be super happy for me, because he always showed me a lot of affection, he was always happy when things went well for me," said Messi.