

Croatia, cast in underdog role, has the look of a champion

Notes & Cues:**Article:**

It should not be considered disrespectful to suggest that Croatia would have been the unlikeliest champion in World Cup history.

It, after all, is a country of four million people where domestic soccer has long been debilitated by corruption. It is a country that has, in less than three decades since a bitter, brutal war for independence, reached one World Cup semifinal and now a World Cup final, and managed to churn out successive generations of high-caliber players.

Croatia does not have the economic power of France. In an era in which financial might so often makes right, when the traditional European powerhouses hold the balance of power to a greater extent than at any time in history, Croatia's achievement in making it this far is breathtaking.

It went into the World Cup final Sunday as the underdog because of financial reality, because of demography, because of history, because no country of its size has been world champion for almost 70 years, and not because its players are underappreciated or its talent is in doubt.

But it will not, by any stretch of the imagination, be underestimated. As Coach Zlatko Dalic said, this is a team drawn from Real Madrid, Barcelona, Atlético Madrid, Liverpool, Monaco and Inter Milan.

Whatever happened Sunday, this is a team that will not, for years to come, have to worry about a lack of respect.

Summary: