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Win Bet - Leicester 19:50 - Beatbybeatbybeat @ 9/2

VAR Has Led To More World Cup Goals - By Rick Elliott

We had to wait (if that's the right word) until the 37th match of the World Cup for a goalless draw. For most of the fixture between France and Denmark both sides knew a draw would suffice for progression to the last 16. It was obvious from early in the match that the circumstances would create a stalemate because there was no incentive to score. At the time of writing there have been 40 matches in the 2018 World Cup and some clear scoring trends have emerged. These statistics can be useful in identifying betting opportunities over the rest of the tournament.

The biggest variance from the World Cup in Brazil four years ago is the number of penalties. Before this tournament had reached the halfway stage for matches played the tally of penalties in 2014 had been reached. A rise in the number of penalties also had an impact on the average number of goals which stood at 2.63 per match after the bulk of the group fixtures has been played. In the last World Cup the scoring rate declined from round to round and something similar is expected this time.

The above average number of penalties can mainly be put down to one TLA (Three Letter Acronym!). No prizes for guessing we are talking about VAR which has worked in most cases but there have still been some farces due its application and the jury is still out. It seems that whenever a referee refers to VAR his decision is changed. There have been exceptions but it seems like the ref feels obliged to give penalties when they consult the pictures away from the scene.

About 80% of penalties are converted which makes it an anomaly that both Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi have missed from the spot even though it wasn't a bother for Harry Kane twice against Panama. Kane is now in the driving seat to be the top scorer and he is already closer to the total that is usually enough to win the prize after just two matches. Kane is the first player to score a hat-trick for England in the World Cup since Gary Lineker netted three times against Poland in 1986. Only one other England player has scored three goals in a World Cup match. Guess who!

We can expect about 2.5 goals per match in the 16 knockout matches based on the drop in goals after the group stages in previous World Cups. The last 16 brings together group winners and runners-up so the teams are more closely matched and that means fewer goals. Germany's 7-1 win over Brazil in the semi-finals in 2014 distorts the figures but generally goals decrease at each successive stage of the World Cup and that should happen in Russia despite VAR.

There were eight draws in the first 40 matches which is below average. This trend is linked to the number of goals and lack of nil-nil draws. The favourites won 60% of these matches which equates to 4/6 but the average price of the favourites was much lower. Eight underdogs earned three points or one in five which is about standard in the group stages of the World Cup. Both teams scored in exactly half

the matches which tallies with past results in the World Cup. Three matches produced more than five goals and only one team scored six goals in a match! It's hard to believe who!

VAR has led to more penalties and more goals. The average is high for the group stages and will dip as the tournament progresses but overall we can expect ultimately that the 2018 World Cup is relatively high scoring and one of the factors is VAR.

Today's Sports Betting Preview - By Rick Elliott

England Can Beat Belgium Tonight

Who would have thought that England would be fourth favourites to win the World Cup and a shorter price than Belgium to win their meeting in the last phase of the Group matches? Dreams have turned to reality because the Germans are going home and England should not fear any side left in the tournament. Granted beating Tunisia and Panama is nothing to write home about but those two wins have created confidence and momentum. Now the head is ruling the heart because ENGLAND can win the World Cup for the second time and for just the first time overseas and that outcome is 7/1 with **William Hill**.

There has been a lot of chat about the value of coming second in Group G because you might have an easier route to the final. The ever sensible Gareth Southgate pointed out that its ridiculous to be plotting your potential opponents in the semi-finals at this stage of the World Cup. Making changes gives players a rest and provides fringe players minutes on the pitch but it breaks a winning formula. Both managers have hinted at adjustments but Roberto Martinez might go for the second string while England could be close to full strength. In those circumstances ENGLAND must be backed at 8/5 with **William Hill** to beat Belgium today.

The other match in the group is a dead rubber but TUNISIA are a better team than Panama so they are the bet to win that fixture at 5/6 with **Coral**. Only the disappointing Poland cannot qualify from Group H but one of Japan, Senegal or Colombia will be going home. Poland can retrieve something from the mess by turning up and beating Japan. That would make the Colombia and Senegal fixture a shootout to win the group and COLOMBIA can finish top of the table which is 2/1 with **Ladbrokes**.

There is a decent handicap over a mile at Newcastle (4.15pm) where racing will be televised from on ITV tomorrow evening as there are no matches in the World Cup. It's a wide open contest with 14 runners so place terms are one quarter the odds for horses in the first three. BATTLE OF MARATHON has been placed in Group 3 company and the horse looks a big price at 22/1 with **Betfair** to win today.