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The Dutch delight against South Africa is second biggest upset in World Cup history | Data

PREMIUM

Bangladesh's victory over Pakistan in 1999 remains the unlikelyest of underdog victories

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Netherlands team celebrates after winning the ICC Men's Cricket World Cup 2023 match against South Africa, at HPCA Stadium, in Dharamshala on October 17, 2023. | Photo Credit: PTI

For a set of activities that are governed by clear rules, unpredictability is what makes sport a compelling watch. The **Netherlands' defeat of South Africa** just a few days after **Afghanistan's triumph over England** in the ICC Cricket World Cup would not have been predicted by even the keenest observers of the game. Where do these upsets rank among other victories by underdogs over favourites in all World Cup games?





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To answer that question, we take recourse to the use of the Elo ratings method. Elo ratings, developed by professor Arpad Elo for games such as chess, can be replicated for other two-team sports as well. The Elo system assigns a rating to each team, using the results of previous international games. The ICC uses a similar system to rate and rank its teams but it only publishes the current rankings of each team.

We relied upon the work of Gaurav Sood and Derek Willis (outside_edge at github) who constructed an algorithmic approach to calculate monthly Elo ratings for each ICC cricket playing nation/team, to identify the Elo ratings at the start of each World Cup. Sood and Willis had brought out ratings for each team till late 2021, but *The Hindu* used the same method of extracting match information from ESPNCricinfo for later ODIs and found the Elo ratings till October 2023. More involved Elo calculations that account for individual player ratings have been undertaken by others such as Kartikeya Date (@cricketingview in X) but only for Test playing nations.

The Elo ratings of any two teams playing a game during any World Cup are an indication of their prior and recent performances and their respective strengths. The difference in their rating would indicate the gulf between the two sides. A team with a lower ELO rating, defeating one with a higher one could constitute an upset and if the Elo difference is quite high, it would qualify as a major upset.

Table 1 | *The table lists the major upsets in all games played in the World Cup till Tuesday.*

S.No.	Winner	Loser	Date	Edition	Winner ELO
1	Bangladesh	Pakistan	31-May-99	1999	640
2	Netherlands	South Africa	17-Oct-23	2023	989
3	Zimbabwe	England	18-Mar-92	1992	737
4	Zimbabwe	South Africa	29-May-99	1999	1079
5	Ireland	Pakistan	17-Mar-07	2007	763
6	Kenya	New Zealand	21-Feb-03	2003	873
7	Pakistan	England	03-Jun-19	2019	1141
8	Kenya	Sri Lanka	24-Feb-03	2003	873
9	Pakistan	South Africa	07-Mar-15	2015	1090
10	South Africa	Australia	06-Jul-19	2019	1248
11	Sri Lanka	New Zealand	18-Jun-83	1983	812
12	Pakistan	New Zealand	26-Jun-19	2019	1219
13	Afghanistan	England	15-Oct-23	2023	1045
14	Bangladesh	Scotland	24-May-99	1999	640
15	Ireland	England	02-Mar-11	2011	1023

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The Netherlands' defeat of South Africa on Tuesday was despite a gulf of a whopping 457 points between the Elo ratings of the respective teams. This was the second biggest upset after Bangladesh's defeat of Pakistan in the 1999 World Cup (Elo difference of 569 points). Afghanistan's defeat of England on Sunday was only the 13th biggest upset, largely because the former had a better cricketing resume in the lead up to the World Cup, leading to a difference of 255 points in their Elo ratings. If not for technical reasons, this defeat would have rated 12th, as the 6th biggest upset – New Zealand losing to Kenya – was due to the former forfeiting the game after refusing to take the field in Nairobi citing



throughout the years.

Edition	Favourite	ELO Rating	Winner	ELO Rating
1975	England	1119	West Indies	1062
1979	West Indies	1222	West Indies	1222
1983	West Indies	1185	India	1047
1987	England	1337	Australia	1077
1992	England	1240	Pakistan	1057
1996	South Africa	1344	Sri Lanka	1162
1999	South Africa	1437	Australia	1201
2003	Australia	1463	Australia	1463
2007	New Zealand	1364	Australia	1246
2011	Australia	1506	India	1310
2015	Australia	1496	Australia	1496
2019	Australia	1514	England	1444
2023	India	1464		

Having the highest Elo ratings at the start of the World Cup is not always a guarantee of a team’s success as Table 2 shows. Only West Indies in 1979 and Australia in 2003 and 2015 managed to live up to their status as favourites by winning the trophy. And India in 1983 and Pakistan in 1992 were the most unfancied teams that went on to lift the World Cup. Not for nothing are Kapil’s Devils continued to be feted in India for heralding a cricketing revolution in the country. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan might be currently in the lowest ebb of his political career, but the sheer scale of his triumph as cricket captain in 1992 could explain how he managed to reach a peak in popularity in Pakistan.

Table 3 | The table lists the Elo ratings of all the teams currently playing in the 2023 World Cup.



SNo	Team	ELO Rating
1	India	1464
2	South Africa	1446
3	Pakistan	1383
4	Australia	1369
5	Sri Lanka	1362
6	England	1300
7	New Zealand	1288
8	Bangladesh	1180
9	Afghanistan	1045
10	Netherlands	989

(With technical inputs from Rishywanth Ambalam)

Source: ESPNCricinfo, outside_edge at github (Work of Gaurav Sood and Derek Willis)

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