

# Hat-trick hero sparks electric early morning

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**Calcutta:** The stars are in action, led by the biggest of them all.

Football's legend scored his first World Cup hat-trick against Algeria in Kansas City as Calcutta watched in awe early on Wednesday.

In the US, it capped the marquee event's biggest night so far as two other superstars also produced scintillating performances, sending football fandom into a frenzy.

Deprived of a Messi show last December, Calcuttans were savage on social media.

A picture of Aroop Biswas, former sports minister and Trinamool heavyweight, wrapping his arm around Messi went viral with the caption: "The hand of God."

On December 13, Biswas was glued to the football great for much of the 22 minutes he spent on the pitch at Salt Lake Stadium.

An Instagram user post-

ed an AI-generated video in which Messi "dedicates" his first World Cup hat-trick to his "childhood friend" Biswas.

Another post read: "Aroop Biswas cannot be arrested until the World Cup is over. Or else Messi will boycott the tournament."

On Monday, Biswas did not appear before police for the third time for questioning in connection with the probe into alleged irregularities surrounding the December Messi event, which ended abruptly because of mismanagement and led to vandalism.

Event organiser Satadru Dutta, who is out on bail and has accused Biswas of ticket black-marketing, extortion, cheating and criminal intimidation in connection with the event, said in a Facebook post that he did not shed tears during his 38 days in custody.

"But today was different. As Messi completed his hat-trick, something broke inside me. The emotions, the memo-



Fans watch the Argentina-Algeria match in Calcutta on Wednesday morning. (Reuters picture)

ries, the sacrifices, the dream that once felt so close — all came rushing back. For the first time, tears came automatically. Maybe because for a boy from Bengal who grew up watching football with wonder in his eyes, Messi was never just a footballer. He was a dream," Dutta wrote.

Jadavpur resident Sukrit Dasgupta, 36, who swears by

the Albiceleste, adjusted his work schedule to watch his idol on TV. "I virtually attended a meeting that I was supposed to attend in person," said the employee of a tech services company.

He usually drives to his office in New Town. On Wednesday, he reached work an hour late because of the match. "Every minute was special.

Messi no longer plays in Europe's top tier. Honestly, I expected him to be a bit rusty in the first match. But he was in sublime form," Dasgupta said.

In Ganguly Bagan, more than 100 fans assembled at a park to watch the match at 6.30am. "The 2022 World Cup has changed everything. Now, the water is off the duck's back. Messi is playing without the fear of failure," said Uttam Saha, 60.

Travel agency owner Avijit Das said the Messi magic had created fresh demand for tickets to the US. "Since the match ended, I have received scores of phone calls," he said.

Golpark resident Sabyasachi Dasgupta will reach the US on June 21. Argentina's next match, against Jordan on June 28, was not part of his original itinerary. But he secured tickets after watching Messi on Wednesday.

Besides Messi, doubles from Erling Haaland against Iraq and Kylian Mbappé

against Senegal generated the buzz Calcutta had been waiting for.

France beat Senegal 3-1 in New Jersey and Norway beat Iraq 4-1 in Boston. European football has a huge fan base in Calcutta, and the superstars are household names.

"France were lacklustre in the first half. But in the second, Mbappé showed why he is among the best," said Kaushik Majumdar, a 23-year-old MBA student.

Behala resident Dwai-payan Ghosh, 30, had a tough time getting sleep between the end of the France-Senegal match shortly after 2am and the start of the Argentina-Algeria one at 6.30am.

"I woke up at 6am and first watched the Norway match highlights. I love watching club football. But to see the best players shine for their countries at the biggest stage is a different experience altogether," said Ghosh, who works with a pharmaceutical company.