

PERSISTENT VIDEO ASSISTANT REFEREE DRAMA, MAGICAL CURLER & MESSI'S FIRST GAME AGAINST OLD FOE

VAR and AlVARez set up Argentina-England clash after 21 years

The Telegraph
AT THE WORLD CUP



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Atlanta: Argentina and England have set up a mouthwatering World Cup semifinal clash, 21 years after they last met anywhere, but both their quarterfinal victories came with a dash of VAR drama in a tournament fraught with finger-pointing.

Lionel Messi and Co. snuffed and puffed past 10-

man Switzerland in another limp knockout-stage display, lit up only by Julian Alvarez's extraordinary 112th-minute curler from outside the Swiss penalty box that has to be a goal-of-the-tournament contender.

The final score was 3-1, with Lautaro Martinez scoring off the rebound in the dying moments after Swiss goalkeeper Gregor Kobel had saved Thiago Almada's effort on the break.

But much of the talk centred on the 72nd-minute dismissal of Switzerland's Breel Embolo when he received his second yellow for simulation — five minutes after his teammate Dan Ndoye had cancelled out

Alexis Mac Allister's headed goal off a Messi corner.

As Embolo took a tumble, the Portuguese referee showed Argentine midfielder Leandro Paredes a yellow that he agitatedly contested. Enter VAR with a "mistaken identity" check, which means the wrong player may have been booked.

It indeed turned out so — except, rather bizarrely, the right player turned out to be from the opposite team: Embolo was shown to have taken a blatant dive. Being on a yellow already — for a foul on Paredes, to complete the irony — the Swiss received marching orders.

The funniest part was that had Paredes not been



Argentina's Julian Alvarez (centre) celebrates his goal against Switzerland with (from left) Jose Manuel Lopez, Lionel Messi and Lautaro Martinez in Kansas City on Saturday. (Reuters)

wrongly booked, there would not have been a VAR check and Embolo would

have escaped.

But if technology righted a wrong in this game, it faced

questions over an even weirder incident, or non-incident, in the day's earlier game in which England came back to beat Norway 2-1.

Norwegian players and their coach claimed that Jude Bellingham's equaliser in first-half injury time — which cancelled out Andreas Schjelderup's 36th-minute strike — should be chalked off because the ball had hit the overhead spidercam wires and changed course in the buildup.

Some replays indeed seemed to show the ball deviating and dropping faster than expected after a goal kick from Norwegian goalkeeper Norjan Nyland, allowing England to start a

counterattack.

But Fifa said the ball sensor — whose evidence had led to an injury-time Croatian equaliser against Portugal to be ruled out for offside — had registered no contact on the flight path.

The Norwegians also complained when a second-half goal from Torbjorn Heggem, which had seemed to restore their lead, was scrapped after a VAR review showed Erling Haaland shoving Elliot Anderson as a corner was being taken.

Bellingham, one of the outstanding players of this tournament, slotted in a rebound early in extra-time to complete the scoreline and take his goal tally this

World Cup to six — four of them in the KOs.

Shoddy Argentina

For the third straight knockout game, an ageing Argentina looked slow and uninspired even after Switzerland were reduced to 10 men in Kansas City.

The Albiceleste had begun well, with the 5-foot-9 Mac Allister outjumping the much taller Swiss defence to nod in Messi's dipping, outswinging corner in the 10th minute. As the ball swerved over the defence, Mac Allister got ahead of a blindsided and flat-footed Embolo and timed his jump to perfection.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 13 ►

Lacklustre yet 'lucky'

► FROM PAGE 1

The Swiss looked the more threatening side after Argentina took the lead, and continued to dominate the momentum even after Embolo's expulsion at 1-1. A timely tackle by Lisandro Martinez and a couple of good saves from Emiliano Martinez kept the South Americans in the game.

As extra-time wore on and penalties loomed, Alvarez collected the ball to the left of the Swiss penalty box and unleashed a stunning curler that went flying into the far corner past a diving Kobel. The stadium exploded.

It was the first goal for the Atletico Madrid man after a so-far listless tournament.

"Honestly, I was just trying to hit the top corner. Ah... so that's what Messi has been aiming for all these years. Leo is usually not satisfied if he does not find the top corner," Alvarez said after the match.

"We were lucky. We have a lot to improve," Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni conceded on the pitchside after the final whistle.

The lone silver lining for Argentina is that Messi's attacking companions, Alvarez and Lautaro, have begun finding the answers after a slow start. But the team's struggles continue in midfield and defence.

Messi scoreless

Messi failed to score for the first time this tournament, although he notched up his 10th World Cup assist overall. Surprisingly, each has been to a different goal scorer, beginning with Hernan Crespo on

Messi's Cup debut versus Serbia and Montenegro in 2006.

The beneficiaries since then have been Carlos Tevez, Angel di Maria, Gabriel Mercado, Sergio Aguero, Enzo Fernandez, Nahuel Molina, Alvarez, Cristian Romero and now Mac Allister.

Otherwise, Messi toiled without much success most of Saturday night, leaving it to his teammates for once to step up. After all, he is 39 and played 120 minutes of knock-out football eight days ago, followed by another draining 90 minutes on Tuesday and 120 minutes again on Saturday.

On Wednesday, at Atlanta, England wait for him.

The two nations have met just once during Messi's playing days — 21 years ago in a friendly in Geneva that the little genius missed, having seen a red card on his nation-

al team debut a few months before. England prevailed 3-2.

So, Messi will be playing England for the first time in what promises to be a delicious tie, given the ferocity of the rivalry whose ambit goes far beyond football to take in, among others, the 1982 Falklands War.

The flagship match in the rivalry would be the 1986 World Cup quarter-final, where Diego Maradona scored a goal with his hand and another with his magical left foot — arguably the greatest World Cup goal of all-time — to script a 2-1 win.

They have played two nerve-tingling matches in the World Cup since then, Argentina prevailing on penalties in 1998 after David Beckham was sent off, and England winning via a normal-time penalty in 2002, scored by a redemption-seeking



It was a hard day in the office for Lionel Messi.

(Reuters)

Beckham.

On Wednesday, there will be no Maradona — and VAR would surely make any goal-scoring with the hand impossible.

But there will be Messi, and that will be enough to make England jittery.



Switzerland goalkeeper Gregor Kobel's dive at full stretch is not enough to stop Argentina's Julian Alvarez's curler in Kansas City on Saturday. (Reuters)