

Mi Amore

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Mueller's stumble was planned!

Germany forward Thomas Mueller has claimed his stumble ahead of a free-kick against Algeria on Monday was deliberate. Some 88 minutes into Germany's 2-1 round-of-16 win, they were awarded a set piece just outside the box. Five players huddled around as Bastian Schweinsteiger made a decoy run before Mueller stumbled, got up and ran behind the wall, into which Toni Kroos chipped the ball. "It nearly worked out. I don't know if we'll do it again, but I think it was a good

STRAWBERRY CHEESE CAKE



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SPORT

'Argentina lack balance'

AFP, Salvador

Belgium coach Marc Wilmots is targeting a "lack of balance" in Argentina's ranks as the two sides prepare for their World Cup quarter-final showdown on Saturday.

The Red Devils advanced to the last eight of the World Cup for the first time since 1986 on Tuesday with a battling extra-time victory over the United States.

That Belgian campaign 28 years ago ended in the semi-finals, when an Argentina side inspired by Diego Maradona defeated them 2-0 in the Azteca Stadium.

Parallels with that meeting have been drawn in Brazil, not least because Argentina so far have been heavily reliant on captain Lionel Messi.

Wilmots, who has yet to experience defeat in a competitive match since he took over at the helm in 2012, spoke admiringly of Argentina but is confident the South Americans can be attacked.

"I saw three central defenders, two fullbacks who play very high, (Angel) Di Maria and (Ezequiel) Lavezzi, (Gonzalo) Higuain and (Lionel) Messi," said the 45-year-old coach.

"But I also feel there is a lack of balance in that team."

"For once we're not favourites but I don't mind. Once you're in the quarterfinals the only thing that matters you want to go all the way and that is what we want to do."

Wilmots meanwhile said he believed Belgium would cause problems for Argentina.



Under the United States post, Tim Howard was like a keeper who refused to let anything go past him.

PHOTO: INTERNET



A huge Howard

INTERNET, Salvador

Tim Howard was named man-of-the-match as the United States was knocked out of the World Cup on Tuesday, an accolade he completely deserved but would trade away in a heartbeat for a win.

The US goalkeeper was a beast -- diving, leaping, flying through the air and positioning himself perfectly -- but was powerless to prevent Belgium's 2-1 victory that sent the Americans home from Brazil.

Recognition as the standout performer on the field was entirely justified, but in no way did the personal credit take the edge off the disappointment he felt at the US' exit.

"None of that really matters to

me," Howard said. "It is part of the job. It hurts when we lose, whether I had no saves or 20 saves, it doesn't mean any more or less."

With someone other than Howard minding the American net things could have quickly gotten ugly at the Arena Fonte Nova. His 16 saves are the most on record during a World Cup match and his performance made him only the third player in this tournament to win man-of-the-match while being on the losing team.

"Huge," said defender Matt Besler, when asked about Howard. "He is our backbone. It is nice as a defender when you know you have that behind you."

It was likely the last World Cup game for Howard. He is 35 now, and

will be 39 and have just completed his last English Premier League contract with Everton the next time soccer's big show rolls around.

If this was the end, what a way to go. Howard did not disappoint, not for a moment. If a lack of natural talent and overall quality were to blame for the US being unable to get into the quarterfinals, Howard is the standout exception.

Head coach Juergen Klinsmann claimed a month ago that he was one of the top five goalkeepers in the world and while everyone has their own tastes and such things are subjective, it would be hard to argue against that assertion, based on this effort, or indeed the one against

Portugal in the second group game.

"The way Tim played tonight was just phenomenal, just outstanding," Klinsmann said. "He kept us in the game a long time."

Howard briefly thought about international retirement as long as four years ago and there is a fine younger replacement, Brad Guzan, waiting in the wings and prepared for battle after two campaigns as understudy.

Whether Howard pulls on a national team jersey again, an eternal place as one of America's soccer greats awaits.

A warrior who gained soccer smarts all through his career, he has never been better than he is now. On this night his opposite number was Thibaut Courtois, the

brilliant young Belgian who won Spain's La Liga and nearly the Champions League with Atletico Madrid last season.

But good as Courtois was and is, Howard was the one who shined here. Admittedly, he saw far more action, with Belgium nearly constantly on the offensive.

As time ticked on and the US held on towards the end of regulation, Howard was always there, with a word in the ears of a backline that ranged from four World Cup veteran DaMarcus Beasley to 20-year-old rookie DeAndre Yedlin.

The fate of a goalkeeper is a difficult one, and there is only so much a single person can do. For the two strikes he conceded, to Kevin De Bruyne and Romelu

'Lukaku the difference'

AFP, Salvador

United States goalkeeper Tim Howard said Everton teammate Romelu Lukaku proved decisive as the Americans' fairytale World Cup run came to an end against Belgium in the last 16 here Tuesday.

Lukaku, on loan at Goodison Park last season from Chelsea, scored one goal and set up another as Belgium sealed a 2-1 win after a thrilling extra-time battle with the United States.

"They brought big Rom on and he was a handful, he ran at us, scored a goal, created chances for other guys," said Howard. "Big Rom changed the game."

Howard had kept the Americans in the contest throughout the first 90 minutes, pulling off a series of superb saves to prevent Belgium from converting their dominance into a comfortable victory.

And even after going 2-0 down in extra-time, the USA pulled a goal back through teenager Julian Green to set up a nervy finale which saw Clint Dempsey almost grab what would have been a sensational equaliser from a clever free-kick routine.

"It's heartbreaking. I don't think we could have given any more," said Howard.

"We left it all out there. We got beaten by a really good team. They took their chances well. It's heartache, it hurts."

Asked about his goalkeeping heroics, Howard replied: "That's my job, that's what I'm signed up to do. It's part of it in these big games."

Lies, damn lies and statistics Neymar on the mend

ATIQUÉ ANAM

We are now at the business end of the World Cup, and we are no closer to deciding which team -- or indeed which style of play -- is holding court. After 56 pulsating matches and 154 goals, lots of upsets and near-upsets, plenty of drama and heartbreaks, we are left with eight quarterfinalists, all of whom had been the champions in their respective groups. We've had two penalty shoot-outs, three extra-time finishes and three regulation time results in the eight round of 16 matches that took place over the last four days. The goals have dried up somewhat, as expected, after the first round, and most matches have thrown up late twists and drama. Out of the 18 goals scored in the second round, seven have come in extra time; which points to factors like teams' fitness, ability to absorb the heat and pressure and the intent to kill off games before shoot-out.

A great many people have already

lamented the 'demise' of possession football, but statistics from the 54 matches played so far, interestingly show that out of the eight quarterfinalists, three feature in the top five as far as greatest percentage of possession enjoyed -- with Argentina on top with 65.1 per cent followed by Germany on 63.2 per cent and France in fifth with 58.3 per cent. But possession is not the only thing that matters to the end result, but these three teams also feature in the top five teams to have successfully completed the most number of passes.

Brazil, one might find, did not fare too well in either of these areas, yet they find themselves in the last eight. That is because possession and successful passing is worth next to nothing unless you can find a way through to the goal, that is by taking shots and shots on target -- where Brazil feature among the top five in both counts. Italy, you might remember, who failed to make it out

of the group stages, were surprisingly on top as far as passing success is concerned, and were among the top in holding possession, yet failed to convert that possession into meaningful attempts. They managed only three shots on target per game, which is the sixth worst among the 32 teams. And they were the 32nd when it comes to being caught offside.

As far as tackles and interceptions are concerned, which are vital to defending one's own fort as well as going on swift counterattacks, the surprising statistic is that Spain feature atop on both these areas, yet they were the earliest to bow out of the tournament. The statistic perhaps indicates the fact that Spain do not convert the gained possession into swift counterattacks, like some of the other teams do. Another interesting statistic is that Germany, who are believed to be the best exponents of swift counterattacks, have made

the least number of interceptions and rather thrived on possession and clinic of their finishing.

Last but not least, the gruelling heat in Brazil and the fitness levels of the players to last 90-plus minutes have arguably played a part in the outcomes. Some of the teams have even struggled to last the 90 minutes during the group stage matches which were played out in midday under hot and humid conditions. A direct impact of falling fitness levels have seen some teams fight it out for the first ninety, then surrender during the extra thirty minutes. A third of the goals scored during the second round matches have come from late, late substitutions.

But then again, when you cannot even separate the teams by the effectiveness of their style or fitness levels, luck probably plays its part, like the odd shot off the post or the header against the bar.

*All the statistics considered for this article are from www.whoscored.com.

AFP, Teresopolis

Neymar is making good progress in his recovery from thigh and knee knocks ahead of Friday's World Cup quarterfinal against Colombia, Brazil's team doctor said on Tuesday.

The Barcelona forward came out of last Saturday's last-16 win against Chile battered and bruised but has undergone treatment at Brazil's Teresopolis training base and will train normally on Wednesday.

"He took a blow to the left thigh and the right knee, but he has worked alongside the rest of the squad. He is recovering very well," doctor Jose Luiz Runco told journalists.

For the second day running, those players who started the epic clash against Chile were restricted to indoor work, and Runco hit back at suggestions in the Brazilian media that the team are not training hard enough, with the match against Colombia only three days away.

"I need my team to play, not to train," he said.

"They need to rest. They played 120 minutes at one in the afternoon and it was a game that used up a huge amount of strength physically and emotionally."

Neymar was one of those who watched on as a team of Brazilian reserves won 2-0 in a practice match against a youth side from Rio de Janeiro club Fluminense on Tuesday, with Paulinho scoring both goals.

The Tottenham Hotspur midfielder was dropped from the side against Chile after disappointing during the group stage, but is the leading contender to come back into the team against Colombia in the absence of Luiz Gustavo due to suspension.

The other options for coach Luiz Felipe Scolari are to introduce Hernanes for the first time in this World Cup, or even push David Luiz forward into a holding midfield role with Dante coming into central defence.

Meanwhile, Chelsea midfielder Ramires, another player on the fringes of the starting line-up, insisted that Brazil are better prepared to handle stress after the dramatic win over Chile.

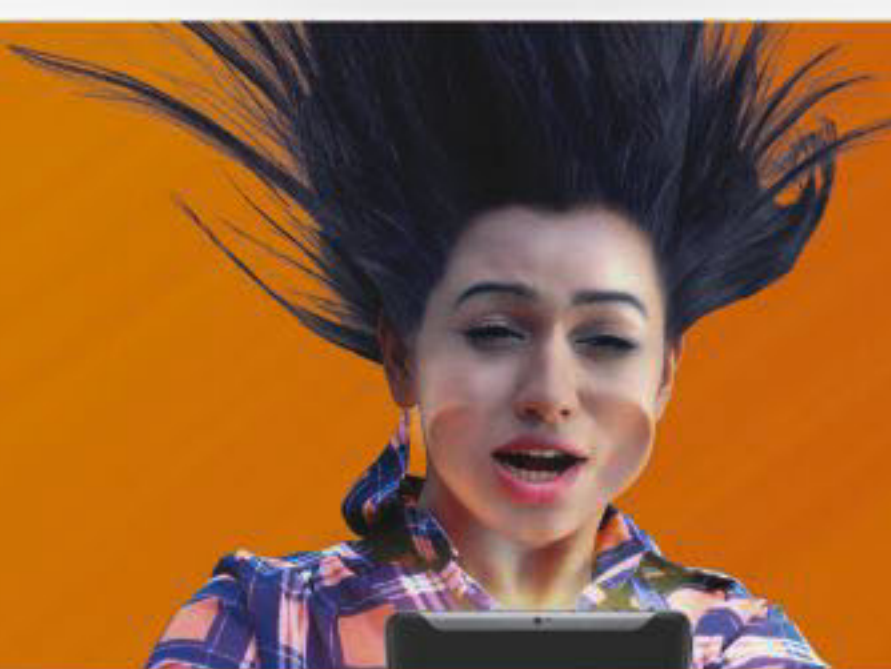
"If we have to go through the same thing again, we will be much better prepared," he said at a press conference, recalling the penalty shoot-out success against the Chileans.

Several Brazil players broke down in tears after, and even before the shoot-out, including captain Thiago Silva.

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