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Divided allegiance in royalty

While international football in many ways unites the world, it can also be very divisive. National and club loyalties can create temporary (or sometimes lasting) rifts between friends, family, and apparently even members of royalty. Wednesday's World Cup semifinal between Argentina and the Netherlands looks to be no exception, particularly for the Dutch royal family. The potential for disharmony in the House of Orange looms large between Netherlands King Willem-Alexander and his wife, Queen Maxima, who was born in Argentina. So far, Maxima has been



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e-mail: sports@thedailystar.net

SPORTS



Argentina's Lionel Messi (C) and Ezequiel Lavezzi (L) share a joke with Fernando Gago during a training session for their World Cup semifinal against Netherlands.

PHOTO: REUTERS

It's Messi v Robben

REUTERS, Sao Paulo

The Netherlands are one win away from a second straight World Cup final while opponents Argentina head into Wednesday's last-four clash looking to end their 24-year wait for a place in the biggest game of all.

Two teams with a rich tradition and an abundance of motivation should produce a close game, characterised by tight marking, disciplined defence and threats on the break as they bid to reach the July 13 final at Rio de Janeiro's Maracana.

But for all the expectation, all the history and all the focus on the tactical approaches of Alejandro Sabella and Louis van Gaal, the clash at the Corinthians arena is likely to come down to how two individuals seize the moment.

With both teams set to pack the midfield, regardless of what formal formation they field, Argentine Lionel Messi and Dutchman Arjen Robben will be charged with producing thrilling moments of skill that could decide who heads to Rio for the final.

The narrative around the 27-year-old Messi's stature in the game has long suggested that the four-time World Player of the Year needs to take his country to a World Cup triumph to enter the list of the game's true greats.

Whether that assessment is fair or not, Messi is certainly doing his best to prove that he deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as compatriot Diego Maradona and Brazil's Pele.

The forward has four goals, all in the group stage, but his contribution has gone well beyond finding the back of the net.

Messi has always had the ability, for Barcelona and Argentina, to drop away from the opposing back-line and run at defences from deep, but in the quarter-final win over Belgium he played almost as a classic playmaking number 10.

In this withdrawn role, Messi successfully controlled the tempo of the game, slowing it down when needed and probing for spaces for striker Gonzalo Higuain to exploit.

So often the virtuoso who provides the dramatic crescendo to an attack, Messi has evolved in this tournament into the conductor of the orchestra.

The absence of Angel Di Maria on the right through injury is a blow for Argentina because the Real Madrid winger has provided the other main attacking threat for Sabella's team.

It will be interesting to see whether the Argentine coach goes with the defence-minded Enzo Perez, who replaced Di Maria against the Belgians, or goes for a more attacking option.

His Dutch counterpart Van Gaal has been willing to adjust his lineup and formation for each game, but the one constant is the reliance on Robben to terrorise defences with his high-speed dribbling.

While much attention has focused on the tricky winger's tendency to go down easily in seeking penalties, that has distracted somewhat from the way his pace, directness and shooting have been the main focus of the Dutch attacks.

Van Gaal's side have cut it fine on the route to the semi-finals though - they needed penalties to get past Costa Rica in the quarter-finals having only beaten Mexico by a controversial last-minute penalty in the previous round.

They will need striker Robin van Persie to recapture his form from the group stage to give the Argentina defence something else to ponder apart from Robben's direct threat.

The two teams have met four times before in the World Cup, including in the 1978 final which Argentina won 3-1 after extra time on home soil. That was their only win over the Dutch at the finals having lost twice and drawn once in the other matches.



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TODAY'S MATCH

SECOND SEMIFINAL



ARGENTINA
NETHERLANDS
Time: 2:00am (Thursday)
Venue: Arena de Sao Paulo



KEY STATS

While Argentina have won the World Cup twice (1978, 1986), the Dutch are perennial underachievers in the tournament having reached three finals but coming away empty-handed each time (1974, 1978, 2010).

The teams met in the controversial 1978 final, which kicked off late after hosts Argentina objected to a plaster cast on the forearm of Dutch player Rene van de Kerckhof. Argentina won the final 3-1 after extra time.

There have been four previous meetings at the World Cup between the sides -- the Netherlands winning two, Argentina one -- in the '78 final -- and one draw.

The Netherlands, with 12 goals, are joint top scorers in the 2014 tournament with Colombia, who have already been eliminated.

Lionel Messi has scored four of Argentina's eight goals, while Dutch forwards Arjen Robben and Robin van Persie have each notched three.

With their 1-0 quarter-final win over Belgium, Argentina equalled their longest World Cup winning streak of five games.

NETHERLANDS V ARGENTINA

History hangs heavy

AFP, Sao Paulo

Fuelled by decades of hurt, Lionel Messi's Argentina and Arjen Robben's Holland will carry competing motivations into Wednesday's tantalising World Cup semifinal showdown at Sao Paulo's Corinthians Arena.

Argentina, who last reached the final in 1990, will be determined to pay appropriate homage to former great Alfredo Di Stefano, who died on Monday aged 88, while arch rivals Brazil could by then be awaiting in the final.

The Netherlands, meanwhile, are eager to rediscover their group-stage swagger and prove they are finally ready to claim football's greatest prize after agonising final defeats in 1974, 1978 and 2010.

"The semifinals are fantastic, but we know what it feels like to lose a World Cup, and we would love to win," Dutch utility man Dirk Kuyt told FIFA.com.

"Argentina are a world-class team and they deserve to be in the last four.

But we want to measure ourselves against the best, and not only measure, but win. That's why we're here."

The second of Holland's final losses came at the hands of Argentina, who won 3-1 as hosts at a Monumental Stadium in Buenos Aires broiling with the menace of the country's military dictatorship.

It is, however, the only time in eight encounters that they have bettered Holland, who memorably won a 1998 World Cup quarterfinal in Marseille thanks to a majestic last-minute goal by Dennis Bergkamp.

Di Stefano never graced a World Cup, either for Argentina or his adopted Spain, but on Wednesday another Argentine great embraced by the Spanish can tighten his grip on this year's tournament.

Messi met with quarterfinal heartbreak at his first two World Cups, but in Brazil the Barcelona superstar has played with a decisiveness that suggests he may be about to definitively make his mark on the game's biggest stage.

Dutch dangerman Robben is in similarly scintillating form, but for all the stars on show, the game in Brazil's sprawling financial capital will also be a painstakingly prepared tactical battle.

Holland needed penalties to see off Costa Rica in the last eight and as the panache that saw them crush Spain 5-1 in their opening game begins to ebb, it is their coach who has taken centre-stage.

Louis van Gaal was heralded for a decisive tactical switch against Mexico and then pulled off a masterstroke against Costa Rica by sending on reserve goalkeeper Tim Krul, who saved two penalties in the shootout.

The future Manchester United manager has played with a three-man defence in three of Holland's five games to date and his innovations mean that his team-sheet will be awaited with great anticipation.

One name unlikely to feature, however, is centre-back Ron Vlaar, who is a serious doubt due to a knee injury.

Joel Veltman is in line to come into

central defence alongside Bruno Martins Indi and Stefan de Vrij, unless Van Gaal opts for a back four.

Argentina coach Alejandro Sabella, whose side beat Belgium 1-0 in the quarter-finals, is without influential midfielder Angel Di Maria due to injury, but left-back Marcos Rojo is available again after suspension.

Gonzalo Higuain's goal against Belgium showed that Argentina are not entirely dependent on Messi, but midfielder Javier Mascherano has warned his side that they face an evening of knife-edge tension on Wednesday.

"We know that we are going to play against a team that is at its best when playing on the counter-attack, because of the pace they have in attack," said the Barcelona player.

"We need to make sure we don't lose the ball unnecessarily. Concentration will be key, along with the way we set our stall out in the match, and we will need to be patient when it comes to making decisions."

Battles within the battle

AFP, Sao Paulo

Robin van Persie v Martin Demichelis

Manchester United striker Van Persie will be eager to finally end his record of never having scored in the knockout stages of a major international tournament, and will find himself up against an Argentina defence that could be marshalled by Manchester City man Demichelis.

Against Costa Rica in the quarter-finals, Van Persie, 30, and his fellow attackers were unable to breach a packed opposition defence, but Argentina's commit-

ment to getting forward should give him some more space to play with.

Argentina coach Alejandro Sabella could yet spring a surprise and play with three centre-backs in Sao Paulo, although Demichelis will hope to keep his place regardless.

Arjen Robben v Marcos Rojo

Now 30, Robben remains one of the most dangerous wingers in the game, the Bayern Munich man having always maintained his terrifying pace on the ball.

Robben loves to cut inside from the right flank onto his left foot, a move that has seen him score countless important

goals throughout his career. FIFA's statistics show that he has made a total of 17 solo dribbles into the opposition area, nine more than any other player.

For Argentina, Rojo is available again after suspension and seems certain to return at left-back in place of Jose Maria Basanta.

Rojo has been arguably Argentina's best defender at the competition so far, but he has not yet come up against an opponent of Robben's quality.

Wesley Sneijder v Javier Mascherano

Coming into the World Cup, Sneijder's

place in the Dutch side was the subject of some doubt. But he has been a prominent player in Louis van Gaal's midfield thanks to his creativity as well as his willingness to go for goal himself.

Only Robben has had more attempts on goal than the Galatasaray man, who is also one of just two players to have been denied by the woodwork on two separate occasions. The other is France midfielder Yohan Cabaye.

In opposition to Sneijder, Mascherano patrols in front of the Argentina defence. While his passing ability should not be underestimated, he adds the grit in the

middle of the park and will look to stop Sneijder from playing.

The Dutch defence v Lionel Messi

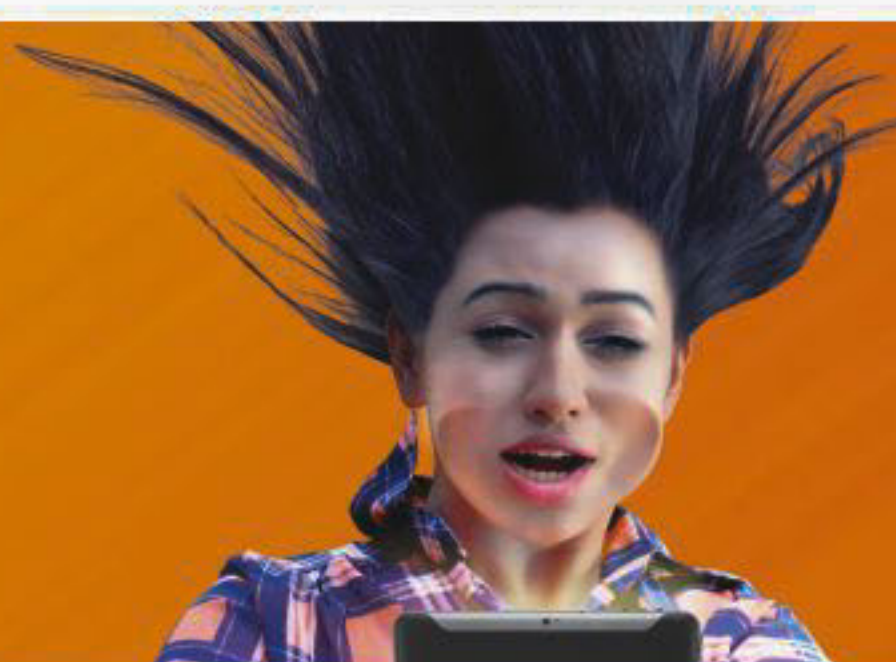
The injury suffered by Angel di Maria in the win over Belgium is a big blow to Argentina, who will miss his threat coming forward from midfield. Nevertheless, as long as Messi is available, Sabella's side should not need to worry too much.

Van Gaal has favoured a three-man central defence so far, and if he sticks with that system the Dutch should have the numbers to cope with Messi as well as Gonzalo Higuain and whoever else lines up in attack for Argentina.

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