

## Dutch fate undeserved, says Sneijder

AFP, Sao Paulo

The Netherlands' penalty shootout loss to Argentina in the World Cup semi-finals on Wednesday was an unjust way for them to exit the tournament, according to playmaker Wesley Sneijder.

"We deserve much better," said the Galatasaray midfielder, one of two Dutch players to see a penalty saved by Argentina goalkeeper Sergio Romero at Sao Paulo's Corinthians Arena.

"Argentina were playing for penalties, which wasn't the case with us. We tried to play."

"I missed my penalty. It's a shame. But it's particularly frustrating not to have capitalised on the chances we created over the 120 minutes."

Argentina won 4-2 on penalties after the contest finished 0-0 following extra time. They will play Germany in the final on Sunday.

Dutch centre-back Ron Vlaar saw his opening spot-kick saved by Romero, but having produced a commanding display over the course of the game, he said that he would not let it get him down.

"It's sport, and it's tough. But I'm a man and I'm not going to whinge about it," he said.

"We're going home empty-handed."



Lionel Messi (L) may be the star for Argentina, but Javier Mascherano (R) outshone him in the semifinal against the Netherlands.

PHOTO: AFP

## 'One little step left'

AFP, Sao Paulo

Lionel Messi says Argentina have "one little step left" to climb against Germany in the World Cup final on Sunday where he has the chance to emulate Diego Maradona.

If Messi can match Maradona and captain Argentina to World Cup glory this will be remembered as his tournament.

Success will be even sweeter with the title coming in arch-rival Brazil's own backyard.

Wednesday's tense 4-2 semi-final penalty shootout win over the Netherlands kept Messi on track to emulate the Maradona-inspired 1986 title win.

After the game the Barcelona legend was unable to celebrate with his team-mates in the dressing room after being dragged away for a doping test by FIFA, before he was marshalled out of the stadium without talking to the waiting media.

But via a posting on the photo-sharing website Instagram he said: "I am proud to be part of this squad."

"They are all phenomenal. What a performance they put in. And we are in the final!"

"It's crazy. Let's enjoy it. We have one little step left."

Messi will always be compared to Maradona, the captain of the Argentina team that won the World Cup in Mexico in 1986 and were beaten by West Germany in the final four years later in Italy.

Wednesday's match saw Messi win his 92nd cap for his country, passing Maradona's total number of appearances and moving into sixth place in his country's all-time list.

Maradona played in four World Cups altogether and won one.

Now Messi, at the age of 27, is presented with the chance to equal his great predecessor in what is his third World Cup.

The four time world Footballer of the Year impact in Sao Paulo was hindered by the man-marking he was subjected to for the first hour by Nigel de Jong.

Messi confidently dispatched Argentina's first spot-kick, but before that he offered little on a dreary and cold evening at the Corinthians Arena.

A disciplined defensive display by the Dutch ensured that the gruelling Sao Paulo semi-final ended goalless after extra time.

De Jong was handed the task of shadowing Messi everywhere.

For an hour, there were shades of Claudio Gentile's infamous performance against Maradona in Spain in 1982, when the Italian defender shackled the young genius as holders Argentina bowed out in the second phase.

# Holland's nearly man again Dutch press pleased

AFP, Sao Paulo

The Netherlands' heartbreaking penalty shootout loss to Argentina in the World Cup semi-finals looks to have definitively ended Arjen Robben's hopes of exorcising his ghosts from the 2010 final.

Wednesday's game at an overcast Corinthians Arena had been billed as a duel between Robben and Lionel Messi, but instead it was the defenders on both sides who took centre-stage.

While Messi was masterfully coralled by Dutch centre-back Ron Vlaar, Robben rarely threatened to add to his tally of three tournament goals.

Set free by Wesley Sneijder on the stroke of full-time, he was denied by a magnificent sliding block from Argentine midfielder Javier Mascherano.

And when he finally managed to cut inside his man on the right flank and shoot at goal in trademark fashion in the first half of extra time, his effort flew straight at Argentine goalkeeper Sergio Romero.

Robben at least found the target in the penalty shootout, after the game finished goalless following extra time, sweeping the ball into the bottom-right corner as Romero plunged the other way.

But Romero had already saved from Vlaar by that point and when Sneijder's subsequent spot-kick met the same fate, it was left to Maxi Rodriguez to fire Argentina into a showdown with Germany in Sunday's final.

Having been within touching distance of a second consecutive final appearance, Holland must instead prepare for Saturday's third-place play-off with Brazil, and Robben was less than enthused by the prospect.

"The third-place match? Honestly, it's only the title that interested me," he said. "Losing drives me mad. It hurts."

Beaten in three World Cup finals and two semi-finals, Holland have become accustomed to encountering heartbreak at football's showpiece event, but Wednesday's defeat was particularly hard to stomach for Robben.

Four years ago, in the final in Johannesburg, he was once again billed as Holland's lethal weapon, but when put clean through by Sneijder in the second half, with the score 0-0, he could



Netherlands forward Arjen Robben wears a forlorn look after losing to Argentina in penalty shootout in the World Cup semifinals in Sao Paulo on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

only find Spain goalkeeper Iker Casillas's legs.

Few of Holland's players wore a look as haunted as Robben's in the moments after Spain's 1-0 victory at the Soccer City Stadium, and misfortune was not yet finished with him either.

Robben had already finished on the losing side in a Champions League final in 2010, when Bayern Munich lost 2-0 to Inter Milan, and when fate presented him with an opportunity to make amends, he failed to seize it.

In the 2012 final, against his former club Chelsea and at Bayern's very own Allianz Arena, he squandered an opportunity to give his side an extra-time lead with a penalty that was saved by Petr Cech.

Chelsea went on to win on penalties, and Robben's transformation into football's ultimate nearly man appeared complete.

The following season, however, things

changed, as Robben capped a fine campaign by scoring an injury-time winner against Borussia Dortmund in the Champions League final at Wembley Stadium.

A weight off his shoulders, the 30-year-old enjoyed a stunning 2013-14 season, scoring 21 goals in 45 games as Bayern won a league and German Cup double.

He carried his form to Brazil, netting twice in the 5-1 rout of Spain, once in the 3-2 win over Australia, and winning the injury-time penalty that saw Holland edge Mexico 2-1 in the last 16.

Although he sparked controversy by admitting he had gone to ground too easily during the game against Mexico, it was as a potential player of the tournament that he arrived in Sao Paulo to face Argentina.

Romero thwarted those hopes, however, and as Robben will be 34 by the time of the 2018 World Cup in Russia, the ghosts of Johannesburg

# Argentina win made Mascherano it sourer for Brazil steps up

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

Brazil's World Cup nightmare worsened with Argentina reaching the final on Wednesday.

Still agonizing over their 7-1 semifinal defeat to Germany 24 hours earlier, Brazilians will now have to watch their bitter rivals Argentina play for the trophy at the legendary Maracana Stadium on Sunday.

Many Brazilians rooted for the Netherlands to beat Argentina in Wednesday's semifinal. But Argentina beat the Dutch 4-2 in a penalty shootout after a 0-0 draw.

"Seeing Argentina in the final in our home hurts, especially after the Selecao's worst ever defeat," said Marcio Carneiro da Silva, 36, a mailman drowning his sorrows with a beer on the terrace of a Rio de Janeiro restaurant.

His friend Cesar Augusto, 37, already picked a new team for Sunday.

"Now I'm German," he said.

The Brazilian noted that the final will be in the same stadium where Brazil lost the decisive game of the 1950 tournament to Uruguay, a defeat that traumatized the country.

"The nightmare continues," wrote O Dia newspaper in its online edition.

"In addition to not being able to dream about a sixth title, Brazilians will have to live with the real possibility of one of its main rivals triumphing in the ultimate football temple," it said.

The sports daily Lance used a Twitter-like hashtag for its title, #SomosTodosAlemanha! (We Are All Germany).

Brazil and Argentina have battled for football supremacy in South America for decades.

Brazilians flaunt their record five World Cup titles at Argentines, whose team has won the trophy twice.

Throughout World Cup history, fans on both sides taunted each other. Argentine fans chanted in stadiums that

football legend Diego Maradona was better than Brazilian great Pele.

But the competition goes beyond the pitch. Argentina was a leading emerging nation in the early 20th century but it was eclipsed by Brazil in economic and political might in recent decades.

At the official "Fan Fest" in Sao Paulo, some Brazilians wore the Dutch team's orange colors, applauding every time the Netherlands were close to scoring.



Now they have to cope with the possibility of President Dilma Rousseff handing the trophy to Argentine captain and superstar Lionel Messi.

"I can't imagine Dilma giving the trophy to Argentina at the Maracana. This can't happen," said Marcos Raimondi, a 44-year-old economist wearing the official Dutch team jersey. "It's worse than what happened yesterday. It's a nightmare. Unbearable."

Amadeus Marques, a 27-year-old doctor also in Dutch regalia, was equally dumbstruck.

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What to make of Argentina? There was a clear narrative laid down for Alejandro Sabella's team and, quite frankly, they've been rather inconsiderate in not following the script.

If they were to reach the final, it was to be Lionel Messi's doing. If they were to win the World Cup, it was to be Lionel Messi's World Cup. Everyone was comfortable with that. And then Javier Mascherano arrived at the party.

While Messi has failed to score in the knockout rounds, it's the wild-eyed, shaven-headed destroyer in the middle who continues to excel.

Wednesday's semifinal was the kind of game that cries out for someone like Messi to dominate. Even in the absence of domination, a moment of magic would be nice. But here there was nothing.

Messi sent a free-kick straight at Jasper Cillessen in the 13th minute and then wasn't seen again until his coolly taken penalty in the shoot-out. For all anyone knows, he could have been back in the dressing room, lazily leafing through a paperback for the rest of the night.

Hand a paperback to Mascherano and you suspect he'd slide tackle it into the advertising hoardings.

Mascherano wasn't supposed to be the face of this Argentina side, but he has come to represent all of its greatest strengths. He is

indefatigable, he is indomitable and there are rumours that he cannot be killed by conventional weapons.

You only have to look at how the Belgians reacted to his snarling presence to see the effect he has on other teams. Marc Wilmots' team decided that they'd rather bypass the middle and punt the ball long to their strikers than take the chance of crossing Mascherano's path.

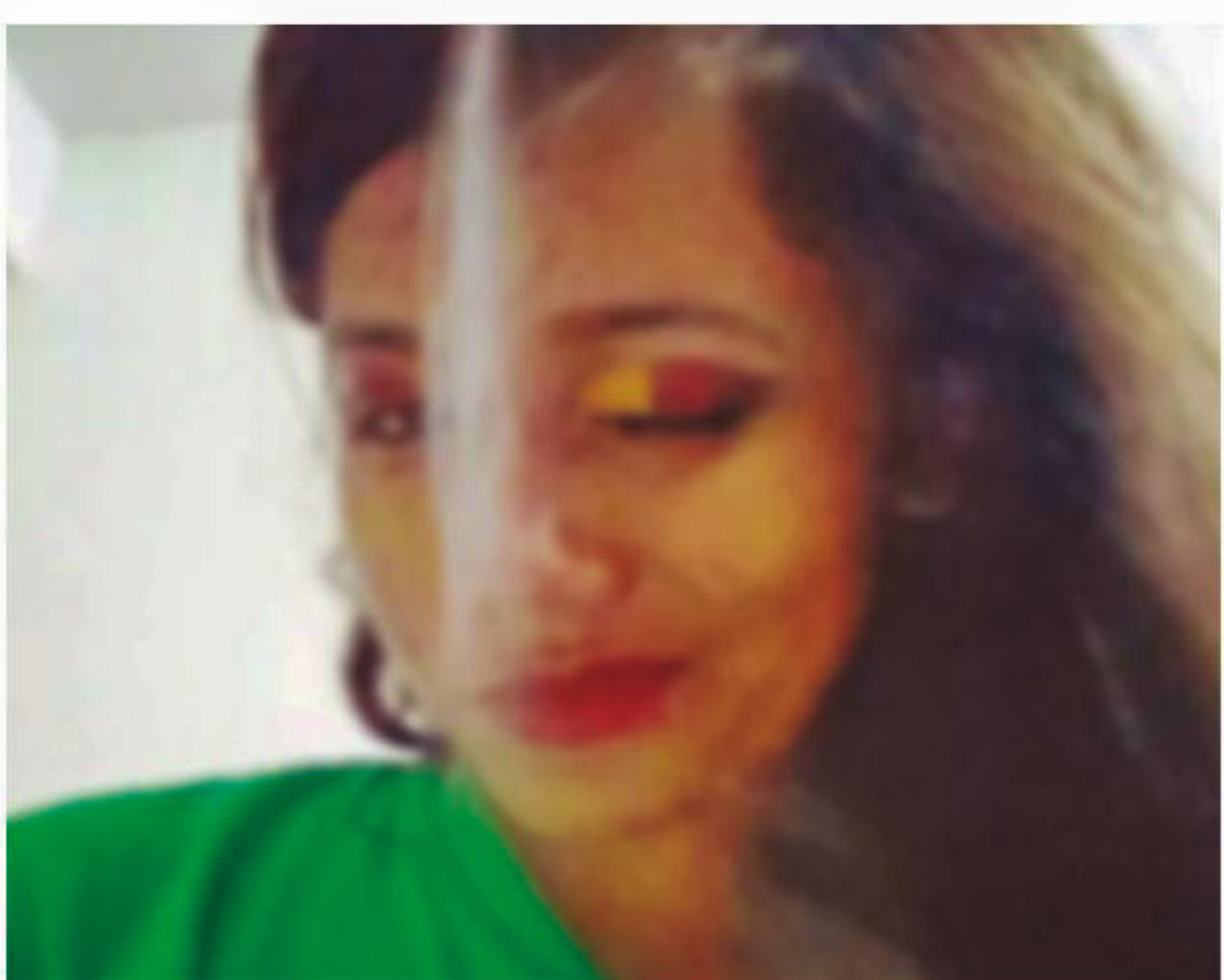
He shouldn't even have been on the pitch on Wednesday after appearing to lose consciousness following a heavy blow to the head. Fortunately for Argentina, FIFA are yet to display any awareness of the dangers of concussion.

Mascherano, clearly still dazed, shook his head like a wet dog and wandered back into the fray, albeit perhaps with no idea what his name was, or what all of these people in orange shirts were doing in his house.

There are two things in life you cannot choose: Your family and the heroes of a World Cup. The marketing men wanted Messi, but tough tackling and tight marking has diminished his contribution.

In his place stands Mascherano, ironically a man all too familiar with the concepts that have neutralised his teammate.

The temptation was to say that if Argentina are going to win the World Cup, they'd need Messi at his best. The truth, based on what we've seen so far, is that Mascherano is now their key player.



Eying German glory.



## BRAZILIAN BAURU

MESSI WINS IT FOR JOURNO

Lionel Messi dedicated Argentina's World Cup semifinal victory over Netherlands to an Argentine journalist who was killed in a road traffic accident on the morning of the game.

Jorge 'Topo' Lopez -- who was covering the tournament for La Red Radio -- died when a stolen vehicle involved in a police chase collided into the taxi he was travelling back to his hotel in.

The 38-year-old previously worked in Barcelona for Sport newspaper, where he became one of Messi's favourite journalists, and the 27-year-old paid tribute to him after the penalty shootout victory sealed a place in the final.

The Barcelona star wrote on Facebook: "I'm sending a big, big hug to the whole of Argentina and a souvenir to Jorge 'Topo' Lopez, this victory is

especially also for you, my friend. A big hug to the family and lots of encouragement."

Messi struggled to contain his emotions after the game.

"I've had to do doping tests so I can't be in the locker room," he added. "I feel proud to be part of this squad. What a phenomenon we are involved in, let's enjoy, we have one more step," reports Goal.com.

KOREAN COACH RESIGNS

South Korean football coach Hong Myung-bo announced his resignation Thursday following a disappointing World Cup showing that saw his team jeered and booed on their return from Brazil.

"As of today, I am leaving this post", Hong told a press conference in Seoul. "When we left for the World Cup, I said we would give hope to the people but we ended up giving them disap-

pointment. I really feel sorry about that", he said.

Hong's decision to step down came just a week after he received a vote of confidence from the Korean Football Association (KFA).

"When said he should coach the national side through the 2015 Asian Cup tournament."

The coach and his players were criticised by the South Korean public and media for failing to advance beyond the group stage in Brazil, managing just a draw with Russia and then two defeats to Algeria and Belgium.

When the team returned home, angry fans unfurled a banner at the airport saying "Korean Soccer is Dead" while others pelted the players with toffees -- a particularly insulting gesture in South Korea.

Hong had offered to step down about immediately, but last week KFA vice-president Huh Jung-moo said the association had persuaded him to stay, reports AFP from Seoul.

HITLER TWEETER SAYS SORRY

A Malaysian lawyer apologised Thursday for a tweet praising Adolf Hitler following Germany's World Cup win over Brazil, after Prime Minister Najib Razak rebuked him for his "unacceptable" statement.

Bung Mokhtar Radin, a politician with Najib's ruling United Malays National Organisation, congratulated Germany on Wednesday by posting on Twitter, "Well done... Bravo... Long Live Hitler".

Najib condemned Bung Mokhtar's comments as "unacceptable and wrong" in a statement issued by his office Thursday and ordered him to withdraw them.

Bung Mokhtar himself also tweeted an apology on Thursday after defending his remarks earlier amid criticism. "When Germany whacked Brazil, I unintentionally said something that hurt d feeling of d ppl in Germany. MY SINCEREST APOLOGY. LONG LIVE BUNG," he posted.

Germany thrashed Brazil 7-1, dealing the host nation the worst semifinal defeat in World Cup history.

Bung Mokhtar has drawn condemnation in the past for statements deemed offensive and insensitive.

During a debate over a leaky parliament roof in 2007, he said: "Where is the leak? The Batu Gajah MP also leaks every month," referring to an opposition lawmaker's menstrual cycle, reports AFP from Kuala Lumpur.

'KLOSE IS NO RONALDO'

Jose Mourinho has applauded Miroslav Klose for becoming the top goal-scorer in World Cup history, but says he is not a

patch on Brazil's great Ronaldo.

The 36-year-old's first half tap-in in Germany's 7-1 semifinal thrashing of Brazil took his tally to 16 goals in the competition -- one ahead of the former Barcelona and Real Madrid star.

Every one of Klose's World Cup strikes have come inside the penalty area, in contrast to Ronaldo's range of long distance hits, solo efforts and close-range goals during a stunning international career.

As a result, Mourinho was disappointed to see the former Barcelona and Real Madrid star lose his tournament record and revealed there is only one player he rates more highly than the Brazilian in the game's history.

"Hats off to Klose," Mourinho said to Yahoo. "I highly respect the numbers he has achieved but the truth is that a player who I consider the best player of the last two decades -- at least he doesn't lose the title of being the best of the past 20 years."

Mourinho worked with Ronaldo

## Two refused to take first shot

AFP, The Hague

Netherlands coach Louis van Gaal has revealed two of his players refused to step up to take the first penalty in Wednesday's 4-2 World Cup semifinal shoot-out loss to Argentina.

The ill-fated honour eventually fell to defender Ron Vlaar, whose effort was saved by Argentina keeper Sergio Romero.

"I asked two players ahead of Vlaar to take the first penalty," van Gaal told Dutch news agency ANP.

"They refused. Vlaar in my view was our best player. Unfortunately he didn't score," the Manchester United-bound coach added.

Unlike in the quarterfinals against Costa Rica, the Dutch fell down in the penalty shootout, with both Vlaar -- who played a brilliant game until then -- and veteran Wesley Sneijder failing to score against Romero.

"Our penalties against Costa Rica were incredible. That should have given us confidence," said van Gaal.

"You have to maximise the first penalty shot," he added.

Van Gaal said he would have brought in replacement goalkeeper Tim Kluiz, who faced the penalties shootout and saved the day against Costa Rica, to take over from regular goal-keeper Jasper Cillessen.

"But I've already used my three substitutes at that time."

"In the end Romero stopped two penalties," he said.

Argentina face Germany in Sunday's final while van Gaal's Holland take on Brazil in the third place play-off 24 hours earlier.

## 'Germany don't faze Argentina'

REUTERS, Sao Paulo

Argentina are not intimidated by facing Germany in the World Cup final despite seeing them tear holes Brazil to shreds in the semis, striker Gonzalo Higuain said on Wednesday.

"There's no intimidation, not at all. There is respect. They will also be worried that Argentina is in the final," Higuain told reporters after his side beat the Netherlands 4-2 in a penalty shootout to book a place in the final.

Germany thrashed Brazil 7-1 on Tuesday in one of the most shocking results in soccer history, but Higuain said Argentina had no reason to fear anyone.

"We're in the final and the other stuff doesn't matter. Everyone who plays struggles and fights to the death."

Argentina beat the Netherlands 4-2 on penalties following a 0-0 draw after extra time in their semifinal on Wednesday.