



Argentina captain Lionel Messi (L) celebrates with teammate Sergio Aguero (R) after scoring a penalty against Paraguay during their Copa America Group B encounter at the Mineirao Stadium in Belo Horizonte on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Messi saves blushes

AFP, Belo Horizonte

A Lionel Messi penalty salvaged a 1-1 draw for Argentina against Paraguay on Wednesday as the two-time world champions once again struggled at the Copa America.

Messi swept in a 57th-minute spot-kick at Belo Horizonte's Mineirao Stadium to cancel out a first-half opener from Paraguay's Richard Sanchez.

Argentina also had goalkeeper Franco Armani to thank for a second half penalty save that prevented Paraguay from taking a 2-1 lead in the Group B battle.

The draw left Argentina with one point from two games and on the bottom of the table with one game remaining.

However with the two best third placed teams advancing to the quarterfinals, Argentina can still reach the last eight with a decisive win over Qatar in their final group game.

"We have to win," Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni said of his team's

date with Qatar. "We will take stock of what we did well and what we did not do well and we will make decisions. We are lucky that we are still alive in this tournament," added Scaloni, singling out goalkeeper Armani for special praise.

"We trust Franco," Scaloni said. "He is our starting goalkeeper. He saved a penalty and kept us alive. I'm glad he had a good performance."

The South American giants will need to raise their game however to advance any further after another disjointed performance which followed their opening defeat to Colombia on Saturday.

A lacklustre opening saw both sides struggle to generate any sort of attacking momentum, with neither side managing to get a shot on goal until Paraguay striker Derlis Gonzalez's effort was deflected behind for a corner in the 29th minute.

From the ensuing set piece, centre-half Junior Alonso scooped a half-chance wide as Argentina escaped.

That flurry of activity spurred Argentina fleetingly at the other end,

with Lautaro Martinez winning a free-kick in a dangerous position on the edge of the area after a foul by Paraguay skipper Gustavo Gomez.

Messi however was unable to conjure anything from the free-kick, floating his effort up and over the wall but without the pace to trouble goalkeeper Roberto Fernandez, who gathered comfortably.

In the 37th minute however, Paraguay's more organised performance got its reward.

A swift counter-attack saw the ball transferred to Newcastle United's Miguel Almiron near halfway.

The livewire forward turned on the after-burners to roast Roberto Pereyra down the left wing before crossing for Sanchez who drove a low finish into the bottom corner of the Argentina net.

A rattled Argentina were given a huge let-off moments later when Armani came racing out of his area to shut down Gonzalez.

A wild kick brought down the Paraguayan player but Armani somehow escaped a red card and was only cautioned.

Rangamati, Manikganj advance

SPORTS REPORTER

Rangamati and Manikganj moved into the final round of JFA U-14 National Women's Football Championship after emerging as zonal champions at different venues yesterday.

Rangamati thrashed Khagrachari 5-0 in the final at the Khagrachari Stadium with Sayati Chakma scoring four goals while Manikganj handed a 1-0 defeat to Madaripur at the Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni Stadium in Gopalganj. Rubina scored all-important goal.

At the Rafique Uddin Bhuiyan Stadium, Tangail blanked Gazipur 7-0 and Narayanganj beat Netrokona 1-0.

Can Abahani match Mohammedan's feat?

SPORTS REPORTER



Abahani are considered pioneers of modern football in the country after Bangladesh's independence but when it comes to AFC-sanctioned tournaments, they have not been able to reach the heights of archrivals Mohammedan.

Abahani have now raised hopes of accomplishing what Mohammedan did twice some 30 years ago, when they progressed to the second round of the now-defunct AFC Club Cup Championship -- first in the 1988-89 edition and then in the 1990-91 edition.

The Dhanmondi-based outfit were the first to represent Bangladesh at the AFC Club Cup Championship -- rebranded the AFC Champions League in 2002 -- in 1985, but they finished behind Indian outfit East Bengal despite winning four of five matches in their six-team group.

Abahani also withdrew from the AFC Club Cup Championship in the 1993-94 edition before starting their campaign again in the newly-introduced AFC President's Cup in 2008. They participated in that tournament five times from 2008-2013 but could not change their luck. They came closest in the 2009 edition, when they finished tied for top spot with FC Aşgabat. However, the Turkmenistan outfit came out ahead on goal difference, disintegrating Abahani's dream of qualifying for the knockout stage.

After the AFC President's Cup was abolished following its 10th edition in 2014, Abahani entered the AFC Cup, a second-tier club tournament, and endured

two disappointing campaigns where they finished fourth and third in their four-team group in 2017 and 2018 respectively.

Abahani managed only one win and one draw from six matches on both occasions previously, but this time around they are on the verge of advancing to the second round. They are currently on top of the four-team table with 10 points from five matches, two points ahead of second-placed Indian outfit Chennaiyin FC.

Bolstered by Wednesday's commanding 5-0 win over Nepal's Manang Marshyangdi Club -- Abahani's second biggest win in the AFC-sanctioned tournament behind a massive 8-1 triumph over Club Valencia of Maldives in 1985 -- the six-time Bangladesh Premier League champions will attempt to secure three points against hosts Minerva Punjab on June 26 in Guwahati, Assam to realise their long-standing dream of advancing to the second round [inter-zonal play-off].

That dream can be shattered if Abahani slip against the I-league champions, the only unbeaten side in the group having drawn all five of their matches. They gave Abahani a run for their money in Dhaka after taking the lead twice and Minerva will certainly pose a challenge once again.

However, Abahani's result will not be a factor if Chennaiyin FC fail to win against Manang Marshyangdi Club, whose coach Chhiring Lopsang Gurung wants to end the AFC Cup campaign with at least one victory.

Abahani are well within reach of not only advancing to the next round, but also equaling the feats of falling giants Mohammedan. Now only time can tell whether they can finally cross that hurdle.



France superstar Kylian Mbappe (L) signs autographs for fans at a promotional event in Tokyo yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Inclusion of women's cricket lauded by ICC, ECB

ICC

The International Cricket Council (ICC) and England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB), welcome the decision by the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) to nominate women's cricket for inclusion at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham in 2022.

The decision, which needs to be ratified by CGF members, follows a comprehensive bidding process, where the ICC, in partnership with the ECB, presented the compelling case for women's cricket to become part of the Commonwealth Games sport programme.

The application for inclusion of women's cricket for Birmingham 2022 is part of the global ambition for cricket to inspire and empower women and girls around the world and to drive greater levels of inclusivity and opportunity throughout the sport. ICC Chief Executive Manu Sawhney said: "We are absolutely delighted that women's cricket has been nominated for inclusion in Birmingham 2022."



England forward Ellen White celebrates after winning the Women's World Cup Group D match against Japan 2-0 in Nice on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Colombia reach quarters

AFP, Sao Paulo



Duvan Zapata scored for the second match running to send Colombia into the Copa America quarterfinals with a late header to beat Qatar 1-0 on Wednesday.

Carlos Queiroz's team became the first side into the knock-out rounds after following up Saturday's 2-0 win over Argentina with another victory over the dogged Asian champions.

It was a deserved success but one that had looked likely to elude the 2001 champions as they toiled against a Qatar side that defended stoically and held on grimly for more than 85 minutes.

"It was difficult, but we showed patience and mustered the winning goal. The win was paramount and we leave happy," said Zapata, who insisted Colombia wouldn't be taking things easy in their final group match against Paraguay on Sunday.

"We hope for the best possible finish to the group stage."

Qatar, who will host the next World Cup in 2022, may now need to beat Lionel Messi's Argentina in their final Group B match if they are to reach the last eight.

"It leaves a bad taste because the end was close," said Qatar's Spanish coach Felix Sanchez. Zapata repaid Queiroz after the Portuguese coach surprisingly picked the Atalanta striker in place of star forward Radamel Falcao.

"We are on the right path. When you have Falcao and Duvan in your side, scoring is a given," said captain James Rodriguez.

Queiroz's team was off to a flying start, putting the ball in the net after just six minutes, but Roger Martinez's close-range header was ruled out for offside.

James should have given Colombia the lead on 13 minutes as he met Martinez's pinpoint cross just seven yards out, but the playmaker inexplicably headed wide.

Much as they had been in the early stages against Paraguay, when they came back from 2-0 down to draw 2-2, Qatar were under the cosh as Colombia spread the play intelligently.



Colombia forward Duvan Zapata celebrates his all-important goal against Qatar during their Copa America Group B tie at the Cicero Pompeu de Toledo Stadium in Sao Paulo on Wednesday.

PHOTO: AFP

Juan Cuadrado tried his luck from 25 yards but goalkeeper Saad Al-Sheeb was alert to punch the ball away.

Zapata, as he had during the last Serie A season, caused havoc in the Qatar defence with his size and strength but was off target with a pair of headers.

At times it looked like a game of attack versus defence but Colombia were struggling to break down the massed ranks of burgundy jerseys.

When Martinez did split open the defence with a through ball for Cuadrado, the Juventus winger's first touch was too heavy and Boualem Khouki darted across to clear the danger.

Colombia thought they had a penalty early in the second half but VAR -- after an interminable delay -- overruled referee Alexis

Herrera's handball award against Abdulaziz Hatem.

James found Martinez inside the area with a clever pass but the winger fired straight at Al-Sheeb.

Qatar started to show greater ambition and Colombia's goalkeeper David Ospina was called upon to make low saves from Hatim and Akram Afif.

Queiroz reacted by bringing on Falcao for Cuadrado and moments later James teed up Martinez again, but the Club America forward was denied by Al-Sheeb.

The breakthrough finally came four minutes from time as James dinked a chip with the outside of his left foot to the back post where Zapata rose highest to power home a header.

Olympic Day Run tomorrow

SPORTS REPORTER

The Bangladesh Olympic Association (BOA) will hold the Olympic Day Run tomorrow simultaneously at all of their district and divisional headquarters, including the capital, with the participation of athletes, organisers, journalists, students and children.

To observe the event, a procession will begin their march towards the Bangabandhu National Stadium (BNS) from the Bangladesh Shishu Academy at 7:00am with State Minister for Youth and Sports Jahid Ahsan Rusal and BOA president and Army Chief General Aziz Ahmed participating.

After the procession is completed, a cultural show featuring the Army Orchestra team will take place at the BNS while a seminar on 'sports, culture and sustainable development' will be held at the BOA auditorium in the afternoon.

WHAT TO WATCH

GTV, BTV & MAASRANGA
ICC CRICKET WORLD CUP
ENGLAND V SRI LANKA
LIVE FROM 3:30PM