



Argentina have a new hero

REUTERS, Brasilia



Emiliano Martinez needed only a month to establish himself as Argentina's number one goalkeeper and on Tuesday he became a new national hero by saving three times in a shootout in their Copa America semi-final against Colombia.

With the score tied 1-1 after the regulation 90 minutes, the Aston Villa keeper's exploits in the shootout moved Argentina into a mouthwatering Copa America final against hosts and reigning champions Brazil.

Lionel Messi, so often the key man for Argentina, paid tribute to Martinez.

"It was difficult at times," he said. "But we have 'Emi' and he's phenomenal. We trusted him. We've fulfilled our objective of coming here to play every game and now we're going to the final."

Martinez had little to do over the 90 minutes but was superb in the shootout, diving at full



stretch to save from Davinson Sanchez, Yerry Mina and Edwin Cardona.

He also earned a rebuke from the referee for his non-stop cheeky chat aimed at Colombia's players as they lined up to take their kicks.

The 28-year-old, who had spells with Arsenal, Wolves, Reading, Sheffield Wednesday and Rotherham, only made his international debut on June 3 in a World Cup qualifier against Chile.

He was injured in Argentina's next match against Colombia and taken off when they were leading 2-0. The game ended 2-2 and Martinez was thrown right back into the fray for the next game.

Since then he has impressed in what has been a problem position for coach Lionel Scaloni, conceding just three times in six games.

Martinez, who may not even have started at the Copa America had River Plate keeper Franco Armani not tested positive for COVID-19, said there was no stopping Argentina now.

"We've spent 40 days locked away, not seeing anyone outside our bubble," he said after Tuesday's victory. "We said on the first day we want to get to the final and what better than to play Brazil at their home."

"Brazil have a great team but we have the best in the world and we're going there to win."

'Want to win a title with the national team'

AGENCIES

Lionel Messi's search for an international trophy with Argentina continued as the La Albiceleste went closer to the desired trophy by making it through to the final of the Copa America where they will face Brazil. Neymar had wanted Messi in the final and the Argentine spoke about Neymar's wish and Argentina making the final.

"I want Argentina, I am cheering them on," Neymar said with a smile after their 1-0 victory against Peru saw them through to the final on Tuesday. "I have friends there and in the final Brazil will win."

Asked about Neymar's comments the other day, Messi said: "We are both in the final, I know that Ney said it on the one hand because we are friends and he wanted me to be there too."

The eyes of the football world will be on the final with the two most talented South America stars, playing for the two of the biggest teams, facing off in a final.

The game will generate lots of passion and Messi said Argentina were more excited than ever.

"Surely it will be very even and complicated. We are very excited, we achieved the first objective, which was the final, to play all the games, and now we are more excited than ever in search of that Cup," Messi said.

On a personal level too, Messi wanted team glory. He said the days have been difficult but the sacrifices the team has made may be worth it if they win in the final hurdle.

"We are very excited, happy, personally I have to play one more, what I want most is to win a title with the national team, but beyond lifting the cup or not, I think I really enjoyed these 45 difficult days without seeing the family. Some of the boys were fathers and could not be present on the day of the birth of their children, which is the most important thing in life. All that sacrifice, that effort for the goal and now we are there."



SCORES IN BRIEF

BANGLADESH

1st innings: 294 for eight in 83 overs (Mominul 70, Liton 95, Mahmudullah 54 not out, Shadman 23, Taskin 13 not out; Muzarabani 3-48, Ngarava 1-36, Tiripano 2-36, Nyauchi 2-69)



Batsmen vindicate hilarious decision Scan the QR Code to read the story



Bangladesh batsman Liton Das plays one towards the square-leg region during his 95-run knock against Zimbabwe on the first day of the only Test in Harare yesterday. Liton, whose previous top Test score was 94, pulled a short delivery to be caught agonisingly short of the landmark but his 138-run partnership with Mahmudullah Riyad did help Bangladesh to a decent total after being reduced to 132 for 6 at one stage.

PHOTO: ICC



Defensive approach puts Tigers on the run

SPORTS REPORTER



Bangladesh's questionable team selection in the longest format once again raised eyebrows as the visitors

were under tremendous pressure following a disastrous start with the bat against the host Zimbabwe at the Harare Sports Club Ground.

However, Liton Das and Mahmudullah Riyad fought back and added a crucial 138-run stand for the seventh wicket to somehow rescue the Tigers from collapsing miserably.

Liton played brilliantly under pressure but missed out on his maiden century by just five runs as Donald Tiripano struck twice in the final session.

At stumps, Bangladesh were 294 for 8 with Mahmudullah, having returned to the Test side after 16 months, worked hard for his unbeaten 54 while Taskin Ahmed also provided valuable support with his unbeaten 13.

Bangladesh was without their in-form experienced opener Tamim Iqbal who was yet to recover from his knee injury as the Tigers playing eleven consisted of nine specialist batsmen including all-rounder Mehedi Hasan Miraz. In the bowling attack, the team management surprisingly picked two seamers in the form of Taskin Ahmed and Ebadat Hossain while Shakib Al Hasan and Miraz were made to look after the spin department.

But once again the defensive approach and negative mentality—to have that extra cushion lower down the order by adding an extra batsman in the playing eleven—kept Bangladesh at the back-foot right from the start.

Host Zimbabwe on the other hand, included four-seamers in the line-up and immediately got the reward after Bangladesh elected to bat. Pacer Blessing Muzarabani struck twice early in the morning to dismiss opener Saif Hasan on duck followed by removing Najmul Hossain Shanto who was caught at slips on two as the Tigers were struggling on 8 for 2 inside five overs.

Since then another opener Shadman Islam, also making a comeback to the side, paired with skipper Mominul Haque and added sixty for the third wicket that provided some stability for the visitors.

But Bangladesh lost their third wicket of Shadman, out for 23, and the Tigers once again started to look shaky and headed to lunch on 70 for 3.

The post-lunch session unfolded in similar fashion for the Tigers where Mushfiqur Rahim became the third victim of Muzarabani on eleven after he was trapped leg-before while trying to leave an incoming delivery.

And Shakib, making a comeback to the Test side, couldn't make an impact and was caught behind in a soft fashion while going for a square drive at the bowling of Victor Nyauchi on 3. Skipper Mominul on the other end rode on his luck after reaching his fifty but he too perished on seventy before being caught at gully as Bangladesh was reeling on 132 for 6 inside the second session of the day.

Italy can do it the hard way too

REUTERS, Rome



When the exhausted Italians stepped up to face the cameras following their exhilarating Euro 2020 semi-final penalty shootout win over Spain, the same word kept coming up.

"We all suffered together, now we are one centimetre away from becoming legends," said Leonardo Bonucci.

Man of the match Federico Chiesa said "we suffered as a team", while manager Roberto Mancini pointed out: "There are games where you have to suffer. They can't all be as smooth as our progress so far."

The theme continued into the following day's newspapers. La Repubblica's headline read: "Italy, how much suffering – now the dream is close."

Gazzetta dello Sport columnist and former Leicester City manager Claudio Ranieri wrote: "What suffering, yet again, but this is international football at the top level. A magnificent spectacle, sport is also sweat, fatigue, struggle and tears."

None of this was intended in a negative sense.

On the contrary, Italy's ability to get over the line in by far their biggest challenge of the Euros so far has made many people on the peninsula more convinced than ever of their ability to go on and win it on Sunday.

Italy have won all six of their games at the tournament, and in different ways. They dominated their three group games against Turkey, Switzerland and Wales, scoring seven goals and conceding none.

Against Austria in the last 16, they toiled to an extra-time win against a

physical side they were expected to beat, lacking their usual verve and dynamism but showing impressive resilience.

A blistering first-half of attacking football blew away the Belgians in the quarter-final, with the two goals Italy scored before halftime proving to be enough to win the game after a nervy second half.

But against Spain, it was a completely different task.

Italy's midfield has impressed so far in the tournament and the battle in the centre of the park was eagerly anticipated, but it proved to be no contest as Luis Enrique's side, led by the mesmerizing 18-year-old Pedri, dominated 65% of possession.

The Spaniards also rained in 16 shots to Italy's seven over the course of 120 minutes, but the Italians soaked up the pressure and then showed composure when it was needed most in the shootout.

The Azzurri have taken knocks along the way in this tournament, losing Alessandro Florenzi to injury midway through their opening game, captain Giorgio Chiellini in their second, and in-form full back Leonardo Spinazzola against Belgium.

But the way the collective has stepped up to surpass a series of hurdles coming in different shapes and sizes has impressed.

There has been no single stand-out performer, demonstrated too by the fact that Mancini's side has five different players on two goals, becoming just the second team in Euros history to have as many after France in 2000.

They have entertained and dazzled at times, but their ability to suffer, and their experience of doing so, could prove to be this team's most important attribute in Sunday's final.

