



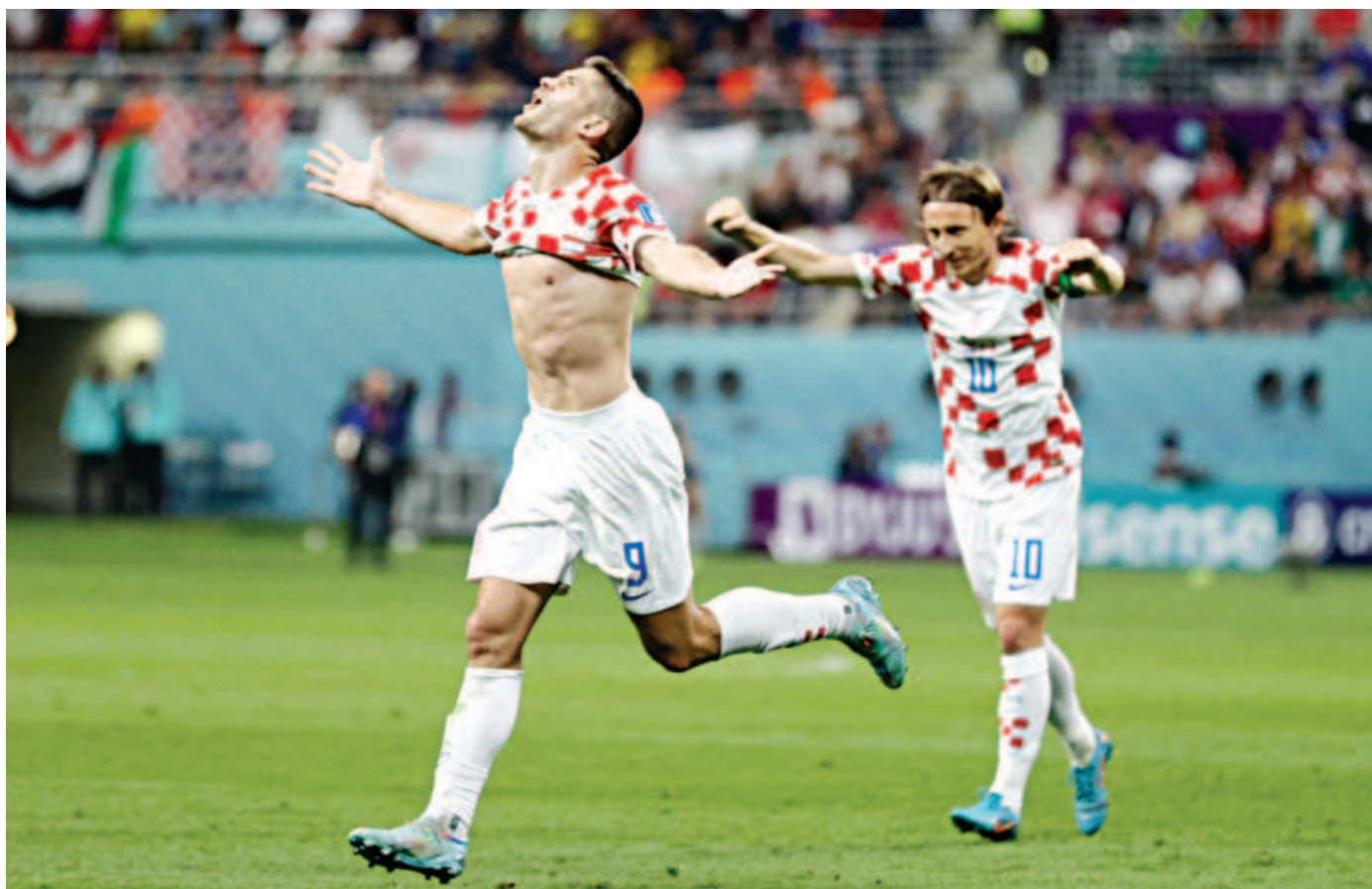
THE LATERAL VIEW Spectrum of spirited acts materialise

IRESH ZAKER

When all hope seemed to have faded for Argentina, a familiar figure from Rosario stepped up yet again. Lionel Messi saved the day for his side for the umpteenth time in his illustrious career and, backed by Enzo Fernandez's golazo sealing victory, millions of Albiceleste fans in Bangladesh lived to fight (not to be taken as a cue or an invitation) another day. However, Argentina's two moments of sheer magic should not paper over their cracks by any means.

It was a disjointed performance by the sky blue and whites overall. From here on, if they do not soon get their shape and intent right, their legion of fans could be in for a world of misery as their third World Cup quest likely gets progressively harder with defending champions France a possible opponent in their last 16 hurdle.

Speaking of Les Blues, they appear ominously good after their two outings. Many a paeon will be written about Kylian Mbappe and for good reason, but let us spare



Croatia forward Andrej Kramaric celebrates scoring one of his two goals in a 4-1 thrashing of Canada during their World Cup Group F fixture at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Kramaric double sends Canada packing

AFP, DOHA

Croatia got their World Cup campaign back on track as Andrej Kramaric's double inspired a 4-1 win that eliminated Canada in Sunday's Group F grudge match in Doha.

Zlatko Dalic's side were stunned by Alphonso Davies's second-minute opener at the Khalifa International Stadium.

But Hoffenheim forward Kramaric equalised and Marko Livaja put the 2018 World Cup runners-up ahead just before half-time.

Second-half goals from Kramaric and Lovro Majer ensured Croatia could celebrate their first win of the tournament after a goalless draw with Morocco in their first match.

Croatia sit top of Group F, above Morocco on goal difference, and a draw in their final game against Belgium on Thursday would guarantee they reach the last 16.

It was an especially sweet success for Croatia after Canada boss John Herdman irked Dalic's men with his profane attempt to inspire his players after a 1-0 defeat against Belgium in their group opener.

In a television interview, Herdman told his players: "They belong here. And we're going to go and eff Croatia."

Dalic had taken exception to Herdman's rant, insisting on Saturday that his team deserved "respect" from their opponents.

Croatia's 24 Sata tabloid ran a full-page photo of a naked man below Herdman's superimposed head, with maple leaf flags over his mouth and private parts and a headline that translated as "You have the mouth, but do you have the balls as well?"

The Croatians let their football do the talking on Sunday, allowing them to seize control of a group blown wide open by Morocco's shock 2-0 win against Belgium earlier in the afternoon. Canada competed gamely but have now lost all five matches in their World Cup history, with their only previous appearance in 1986 also ending in group-stage elimination.

Herdman's team took just 68 seconds to rock Croatia when

Tajon Buchanan crossed into the Croatia area and Davies timed his run perfectly to power a header past Dominik Livakovic from 10 yards.

Canada's first ever World Cup goal was welcome redemption for Davies after the Bayern Munich star's penalty was saved by Thibaut Courtois in the Belgium defeat.

But the fastest goal so far in this World Cup served as a wake-up call for Croatia.

With Chelsea midfielder Mateo Kovacic pulling the strings, Croatia's clever passing and movement gradually took a toll on Canada and they drew level in the 36th minute.

Kramaric was picked out by Ivan Perisic's deft reverse pass into the Canada area and he took a touch before drilling a fine finish into the far corner from an acute angle.

Croatia were hitting their stride and Hajduk Split forward Livaja, selected in place of Nikola Vlasic, repaid Dalic's faith in the 44th minute.

Josip Juranovic's run was halted just outside the Canada area, but Livaja pounced on the loose ball, nimbly shifting it out of his feet before sending a superb low strike past Milan Borjan.

Canada substitute Jonathan Osorio was inches away from equalising with a long-range blast that flashed just wide early in the

second half.

Chances kept coming at both ends and Borjan plunged to his right to keep out Kramaric's close-range shot before Jonathan David's strike was 20 yards was tipped over by Livakovic.

The predatory Kramaric delivered the knockout blow in the 70th minute.

Perisic's cross reached Kramaric in the Canada area and he worked space for a left-foot finish that arrowed through Atiba Hutchinson's legs into the bottom corner.

Majer's tap in completed the rout from Mislav Orsic's pass in stoppage time.



a kind word or two for Antoine Griezmann. Once one of the most feared strikers in the world, he has mostly been deployed as a number 8 in Qatar but has fulfilled that role admirably. For me, these instances of selfless diligence and understated heroism epitomise one of the best spirits of the game.

And as far spirited sides are concerned, I am strongly rooting for Japan to pull through from the so-called group of death featuring Germany and Spain. It is comforting to know by near certainty that their fans will continue their celebrated tradition of cleaning the stadium, and their players to leave the locker room as they found it, regardless of the result. And it was no surprise that they did so again in Qatar, but this time after suffering an agonising 1-0 defeat against Costa Rica.

‘Morocco can do anything’

AFP, Doha

Morocco coach Walid Regragui said his team "can do anything" at the World Cup after their surprise 2-0 victory over Belgium on Sunday.

The North Africans only need a point in their final Group F game against Canada on Thursday to reach the last 16 for the first time since 1986.

Late goals from Abdelhamid Sabiri and Zakaria Aboukhalal at the Al Thumama Stadium secured Morocco their first World Cup win in 24 years.

"We know if you don't give 100 percent it's impossible to win," Regragui told a press conference. "But with these fans, with these players and this spirit we can do anything."

"The competition is not over, we have to recover quickly for the game against Canada. Hopefully we can get a good result for the qualification."

All five African teams were dumped out in the group stage in Russia four years ago but Morocco joined Senegal in winning their second match in Qatar. The Atlas Lions sit top of the group, having also held 2018 runners-up Croatia to a goalless draw.

"We can still be better," said Regragui, who only took over as coach from the sacked Vahid Halilhodzic in August.

"I'm not happy with four points, I want more than that. I want to qualify. "Of course it will be tougher if we get to the knockout stage but that's



the level I want to get to.

"We've matched two of the best teams in the world." The game started in bizarre fashion for Morocco, with goalkeeper Yassine Bounou asking to be withdrawn from the team after the national anthems. Regragui said the Sevilla stopper had suffered an injury towards the end of Croatia game and felt something in the warm-up.

Munir El Khoujoui took his place and made some crucial saves to keep a clean sheet.

"Munir did a great job. I have great players. They listen to the instructions and they fight with all of their heart," added Regragui.

"Keep focused, keep positive and we will get great results." Morocco were roared on by the vast majority of the crowd in Doha.

"The Moroccan public is incredible. It is a people who love football," said midfielder Selim Amallah, who was born in Belgium and plays his club football for Standard Liege.

"This is also why we play hard. We play for our nation, we play for the Moroccan people and we hope to make them proud."



Burden now as big as Messi's gifts

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Lionel Messi dropped off from Mexico's midfield marker and just stood there for an instance, standing quite a few metres from the top of the box, as he usually does. Only a nuanced eye would know that he is waiting for Julian Alvarez to push the centre-backs just a little bit more before he almost willed Angel Di Maria pass onto his feet. This is the nearest distance to goal that his countrymen could find him with a pass and with Argentina's World Cup hanging on the line, Messi did the impossible.

A catapult of a strike that grazed the green below and evaded



If the Messi goal was remarkable for any match played anywhere, Argentina's rudderless performance in the match was just as shocking.

the goalkeeper in the blink of an eye. Raging against the dying light in more ways than one, Messi found the net. Still a gift that keeps on giving, however, the demands on the diminutive Argentine have reached surreal levels to become a burden on his talents.

Where is this burden coming

from? Argentina have always been a clanky side throughout the past few World Cups. The growing expectations have only surfaced after their recent 36-game unbeaten run coming into this World Cup. A defeat to Saudi Arabia in the first game, however, saw old woes resurface -- a failure to

execute and nerves where effort was needed. With expectation, the nerves were not too late to rush in at the World Cup.

If the Messi goal was remarkable for any match played anywhere, Argentina's rudderless performance in the match was just as shocking. It was akin to a

clanky car with abject mechanical failures, or a run-of-the-mill rock band where the drummer was thrashing away, the bass distuned, and guitarist playing the wrong song.

The full-backs in Nahuel Molina and Gonzalo Montiel did very little in terms of showing awareness on the ball or injecting pace. Marcus Acuna, a sort of make-shift left-back against Mexico, was uncertain of whether he was to make runs behind or just make up the numbers.

In the crucial midfield, Rodrigo De Paul, Guido Rodriguez and Alexis Mac Allister did not seem to possess the creative influx to use Messi's unique gifts, while Di Maria operated the flanks from both ends in a free role that paid little dividends, in terms of freeing Messi.

Up top, Lautaro Martinez was not getting onto the game and his first touch on occasions was just as bad as the midfield resulting in turnovers. Even the pressure release ball had to be picked up by Messi with back to goal and

defenders hounding him.

At 35 years of age, Messi's strike against Mexico reminded of the goal he scored against Manchester United in the 2011 Champions League final. He is not the same player anymore but his job has gotten harder.

Forget being title contenders, Argentina midfield has looked more isolated than those of the USA or Saudi Arabia. If a shard of hope is left, it comes from the stability of the last two years of centre-backs Nicholas Otamendi and Christian Romero. The absence of Lo Celso may have been huge considering Argentina had some basis of positional play even in the Finalissima against Italy earlier in June.

On the bright side, Enzo Fernandez excited with his splendid strike and Alvarez up front also allows more room for optimism. All in all, however, hopes remain slim and burden enormous as, Messi said after Mexico match, "another World Cup starts for Argentina."