

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 paean will be written about Kylian Mbappe and for good reason, but let us spare a kind word or two for Antoine



Costa Rica's Keysher Fuller celebrates as his curling 81st-minute effort at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium yesterday put a huge dent in Japan's hopes of reaching the World Cup last 16.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Costa Rica stun Japan to tear up the script

REUTERS

Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu, hailed as a tactical mastermind after the victory over Germany, was left with egg on his face on Sunday after Costa Rica produced a similarly stunning upset to blow World Cup Group E wide open.

Moriyasu's extreme caution was perhaps justified against Germany but to keep the attacking talent at his disposal on the bench against a team that lost their tournament opener 7-0 looked like a waste bordering on the criminal.

The likes of Takumi Minamino and Kaoru Mitoma had shown what vim and vigour they could bring to the Japan attack against one of the best defences in the world after a raft of substitutions in the 2-1 win over Germany.

Although Moriyasu made five changes for the Costa Rica match in a squad rotation ahead of their final group match against Spain, only Ritsu Doan of the substitutes who came on to transform the Germany match was given a start.

Japan again began with a back four, as they had for the first hour against Germany, switching to the more adventurous three-man defence only at halftime.

The Samurai Blue looked clueless as they tried to break down

a Costa Rica side determined to avoid further embarrassment and who kept 10 men behind the ball for much of the time.

Japan's players languidly stroked the ball around in front of the massed red shirts but never really looked like finding the pass that would allow their forwards a clear sight of goal.

Junya Ito and Mitoma finally got on to the pitch just after the hour mark to trigger a marginal improvement but it was not until Minamino joined the fray in the 82nd minute that Japan looked anything like dangerous up front.

By then, Japan, for all their dominance of possession and territory, were a goal down after a defensive error gave Keysher Fuller a glimpse on goal which he took with alacrity.

It was Costa Rica's first shot on goal in the entire match but that, ultimately, was more than Japan managed over the 90 minutes.

Moriyasu was unapologetic about his team's insipid display only a few days after one of their

greatest victories.

"I have no regrets, to be honest," he told reporters.

"The result was a shame but doesn't mean that what we've done was wrong. I decided the tactics. So the result didn't work out but we tried.

"I believe this was what Japan needed in that endeavour."



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.

Griezmann the brains behind France's impressive run

REUTERS, Doha

France have shaken off the curse of the defending champions at the World Cup by qualifying for the knockout phase with a game to spare, and it is largely due to Antoine Griezmann's return to his best.

Griezmann has played as an attacking midfielder rather than a pure forward, brilliantly making the link between midfielders Aurelien Tchouameni and Adrien Rabiot and the attacking trio of Ousmane Dembele, Olivier Giroud and Kylian Mbappe.

"He covers a lot of space, he has the ability to defend and to make others play. It's the Antoine we know, the Antoine who is in form," centre back Raphael Varane told reporters after France beat Denmark 2-1 on Saturday to advance to the last 16 having scored six and conceded two goals.

Griezmann set up Mbappe for the 86th-minute winner with his 26th assist for the national team but the Atletico Madrid player did much more than that at the 974 Stadium.

Griezmann played mainly deep, but also often close to lone striker Giroud or even on the flanks.

"I was impressed by him," said Tchouameni.

"He's got a huge volume of play and everything

is going smoothly between us. I'm impressed but not surprised. You can see him tackle at training everyday."

Like Dembele, Griezmann played selflessly, leaving the limelight to Mbappe.

"I probably ask different things from him, but there is no sacrifice on his part," said coach Didier Deschamps.

"He is so generous. He enjoys building up moves. He will score fewer goals, because there are other players up front, but he is so useful, intelligent. He provides the team with a good balance.

"I could have played him on the right flank of the attack instead of Ousmane (Dembele) but that's not where he would be the most useful to the team."

And Griezmann is also happy in the role.

"I'm proud of myself yes but I'm also proud of the whole team. Statistics are one thing, but everyone made an incredible effort," he said.

France play Tunisia in their last Group D match on Wednesday.



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 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 has 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."