



Argentina and their captain Lionel Messi can ill afford any more mistakes as they take on Australia in their last 16 tie at the Ahmad bin Ali Stadium in Al Rayyan on Saturday. Argentina progressed as Group C champions but only after suffering a shock defeat to Saudi Arabia in their World Cup opener, which had cast doubt over their campaign in Qatar.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Messi strives for Argentina's forever love

REUTERS, Doha and Buenos Aires

Lionel Messi's passionate performances at the Qatar World Cup are earning him oodles of love from Argentines, but their old favouritism for Diego Maradona may resurface unless he brings home the trophy on his final attempt.

The two diminutive and brilliant No. 10s have dazzled the world with their prolific goalscoring and strikingly similar styles, relying on low centre of gravity to swerve and slalom their way past defences, ball glued to flashing feet.

Yet only Maradona, who died two years ago, has won the biggest trophy. He dragged a mediocre team behind him in 1986 when his "Hand of God" goal against England became a symbol of national defiance after the shame of the Falklands War defeat.

For years, Argentine fans said that no matter how many Ballons d'Or and trophies Messi won with Barcelona, he could never match Maradona until he too lifted a World Cup.

And why, they asked, was he so shy and introverted whereas their lovable rascal Maradona had entertained them so richly with jokes, songs and expletive-laden tirades against authority?

Berhalter hoping to draw on Dutch lessons

REUTERS, Al Rayyan

United States coach Gregg Berhalter said he will look to draw on the lessons he learnt in the Netherlands during his playing career when the two teams face off on Saturday for a place in the World Cup quarter-finals.

Former American international Berhalter signed his first professional contract with Dutch side PEC Zwolle and also played for Sparta Rotterdam and Cambuur Leeuwarden during an 18-year playing career.

The U.S., who have not reached the quarter-finals since 2002, will be underdogs against three-times finalists Netherlands but will fancy their chances against a Dutch team that stuttered through the group stage.

"I learnt so much in Holland," Berhalter old reporters on Friday. "It's almost like, what concepts haven't I taken from Dutch football? It was a great experience being there."

"After every training session and every game, you have a debate with your players about it. People love to discuss soccer and you really learn a lot. And it was a great time for me."

"If I wasn't in Holland, I don't think I would have had that background that really helped shape my ideas."

Berhalter is not the only person in the American camp with Dutch experience. Right back Sergino Dest was born to a Dutch mother and Surinamese-American father in Almere, Netherlands and grew up in Holland.

No scope for slip ups for Messi and Co

AGENCIES

Argentina are hot favourites to beat Australia on Saturday in pursuit of Lionel Messi's dream of winning a first World Cup, but they more than anyone have learned not to underestimate an underdog, especially the hard-battling Soccerros.

Argentina suffered one of the biggest upsets in World Cup history with their opening defeat to Saudi Arabia, but recovered their poise to swagger past Mexico and Poland into the last 16.

It was a dramatic turnaround for one of the pre-tournament favourites following the doom and gloom that met their opening result.

"I think we're back to being the team we used to be" before the Saudi loss, said goalscorer Alexis Mac Allister following Wednesday's 2-0 win over Poland.

Argentina came into the World Cup on a 36-match winning run and on the brink of equalling the unbeaten world record.

But after a fast start against the Saudis in which Messi gave them a 10th minute lead from the penalty spot, their fortunes quickly unravelled.

Suddenly, Argentina were facing the very real prospect of crashing out in the group stages.

And even though they won their next two matches 2-0 against Mexico and Poland, it was not always convincing.

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni, however, vowed that his team would give their all to not be at receiving end of any more upsets.

"We will break our backs on this

pitch to compete, we know how difficult this World Cup is, this is football," Scaloni said.

"We saw what happened yesterday (when Germany and Belgium were knocked out in the group stage) but this is not surprising. When you say big national teams deserve to be in the next stage, that doesn't always happen."

Australia, ranked 35 places below Argentina, have already surpassed expectations in winning twice to earn their place at Qatar's Ahmad bin Ali Stadium this weekend for one of the biggest games in their history.

Both teams have only two full days to rest, a factor Argentine manager Lionel Scaloni called "madness".

"We've almost got no time to let it all sink in, enjoy it ... it's recovery, recovery, recovery," concurred Australia's assistant coach Rene Meulensteen.

"But one thing I can tell you, we will be ready."

Overjoyed and exhausted after reaching the World Cup knockout stage for only the second time, Australia will have to play the game of their lives to overcome an Argentine side oozing talent from front to back.

They will be relying on the same fitness, muscle and never-say-die attitude that saw off Tunisia and Denmark, epitomised by hulking defender Harry Souttar, who has played out of his skin despite only just returning from a lengthy layoff.

"They are tough. Anyone who thinks the match against Australia will be easy is wrong," Argentina's Scaloni said.

INFO ZONE		
ARGENTINA VS AUSTRALIA		
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH	
Matches 7	Lionel Messi (Argentina)	Mitchell Duke (Australia)
Argentina 5	Caps 168	Caps 23
Australia 1	Goals 93	Goals 9
Draw 1		



Was Messi even a true Argentine anyway, some grumbled, especially older fans. After all, he left for Spain at 13 while Maradona was more one of their own, born in a slum and working his way up through local clubs including Boca Juniors.

Messi has, of course, enjoyed more success in sheer numbers of goals and honours than Maradona, even surpassing his national appearances this week as he drove Argentina into the last 16 of the World Cup. And he has kept himself in great shape whereas Maradona succumbed to drugs and wild living in ways that frustrated and saddened even his most loyal fans.

Those close to Messi say that though his shyness may have disguised it in the past, there was always nothing he longed for more than to bring glory to Argentina. That passion was laid bare when he broke down in tears after leading Argentina to the Copa America in 2021, their first major trophy in 28 years.

"Argentines always had a love-hate relationship with Messi," said 44-year-old fan Gustavo Franchini in Buenos Aires.

Many of the banners in Qatar show Messi and Maradona together, some depicting the late No. 10 smiling down from heaven at his heir.

There is a generation gap among those who remember and revere Maradona most and younger fans less prejudiced against Messi. And it seems the only way Messi can rally the whole of Argentina's love, or at least get close to it, is by bringing the nation its third World Cup.

Netherlands' chance to show they are not all talk

AGENCIES

After much posturing, the Netherlands now need to deliver if they are to fulfil their own prophecy at the World Cup, starting with the opening clash of the knockout stage against the United States on Saturday.

There has been much talk -- all from the Dutch camp -- of the team's potential to go all the way in the tournament in Qatar, principally from veteran coach Louis van Gaal, who enjoys a little mental coaxing and sparring.

But although they won their first round group, there was little evidence to back up their self-confidence as they stuttered through against Senegal, Ecuador and the Qatari hosts.

And coach Louis van Gaal hit back on Friday at the "negative" media coverage of his team at the World Cup.

The 71-year-old is unbeaten in a record



10 World Cup matches as a coach, having also led the Dutch to a third-placed finish in 2014 in Brazil.

But the Dutch press have repeatedly criticised his tactics, saying the current team is too pragmatic and does not play the attacking style for which the Netherlands first became known in the 1970s.

"In 2014 it was exactly the same, it was not different. It was very negative," Van Gaal told a pre-match press conference ahead of Saturday's game.

"But, exact same thing now, same old, so

I'm used to it and I think my players are also used to it.

"So we're going to calmly continue on the path that we've embarked on."

All these outside noise and Netherlands' situation will offer hope to the Americans, who will be underdogs for their last-16 clash but who have already offered up some proof of their potential in an unbeaten run in Group B, with draws against England and Wales and a gritty win over Iran to ensure their progress.

The USA coach Gregg Berhalter said he

is 'hopeful' Christian Pulisic, who suffered a pelvic contusion following a heavy collision while scoring the winning goal in Tuesday's 1-0 victory over Iran, to be fit for today's clash while striker Josh Sargent still remain a fitness doubt. Sergeant also picked up a knock in the win over Iran.

However, Berhalter said his team would have no inferiority complex at the Khalifa International Stadium on Saturday.

"It's a great opportunity, but it's not something that we're going into it thinking is an honour," Berhalter said.

"We deserve to be in the position we're in. And we want to keep going. We don't want to be going home on Saturday."

"And from here anything can happen. All we need to do is play one game at a time. There's no need to even project how far this team can go," added Berhalter, who has an intimate knowledge of Dutch football. The 49-year-old played in the Dutch league for three different clubs between 1996 and 2000.

For the Netherlands, key will be to get Memphis Depay firing in attack and Frenkie de Jong more influential in the middle. Van Gaal has described them both as indispensable to the Dutch cause but they have not yet shown that.

Depay says he is over his hamstring injury, having made two substitute appearances and started their last group game.

"I have drawn a line under the questions about fitness," he told reporters.

"I'm fit. The knockout phase is serious business. We are past the group phase, we can now not afford to slip into it. Many people thought it would be a piece of cake, but it is always a bit different."

The 71-year-old Van Gaal was keen not to underestimate the opposition.

"Australia are very fanatical and sharp on the ball."

The winner of the match will advance to a quarterfinal meeting with either Argentina or Australia on December 9.

INFO ZONE		
NETHERLANDS VS USA		
HEAD-TO-HEAD	PLAYERS TO WATCH	
Matches 5	Cody Gakpo (Netherlands)	Christian Pulisic (USA)
Netherlands 4	Caps 12	Caps 55
USA 1	Goals 6	Goals 22