



Argentina captain Lionel Messi wears a big smile on his face as he rushes towards goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez while his teammates had already converged to celebrate with Lautaro Martinez, who struck the winning goal in the tiebreaker against the Netherlands in a riveting quarterfinal encounter on Friday night.

PHOTO: TWITTER

‘We would like to continue dancing’

REUTERS, Doha

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni believes the never-say-die attitude his team showed in their quarter-final against the Netherlands will hold them in good stead as they move forward to a last-four meeting with a similarly resilient Croatia.

The Albiceleste looked to be cruising to the semi-finals on Friday with a 2-0 lead heading into the last few minutes of the game but the Dutch hit back with two late goals to take it into extra time.

Argentina recovered their composure to have the better of the scoreless additional 30 minutes before progressing comfortably in the penalty shootout.

“I don’t know how many tests of character we have come through in this World Cup, we lost our first game (against Saudi Arabia), we found it hard against Mexico and today, the way the Dutch hit long balls obliged us to defend,” Scaloni told the post-match news conference.

“But this team always knows what it has to do.”

Scaloni has always made it clear that he believes Lionel Messi to be the best player of all time but also takes every opportunity to talk up the rest of his team.

Typical of their attitude, he said, was that he



The Messi we never saw before

ATIQUE ANAM *from Doha*

For large parts of his career, Lionel Messi has painted an image of himself as a calm individual, leaving his boots to do the talking, trying his best to deflect attention. He hardly ever attends press conferences and avoids making controversial remarks. On the pitch, his goal celebrations often remain restrained and his remonstrations with match officials minimal.

The Messi that turned up at the Lusail Stadium on Friday night for Argentina’s quarterfinal against the Netherlands, though, was anything but that version of the little genius. Messi was pulling the strings with his bag of tricks alright, but there was another Messi who was leading his teammates to stand up against the Dutch, seeing them eye to eye.

Messi was even seen arguing with the referee and, most surprisingly, gesticulating at the opposition dugout, especially aimed at the Netherlands coach Louis van Gaal, as if to say, ‘you’ve spoken enough’.

Ahead of the big clash, the Netherlands coach had claimed that Messi was not a problem for the Dutch as long as his side were in possession. While this statement apparently enraged Messi, there was more about the Netherlands coach that Messi and some of his teammates were holding in for long.

Coincidentally, Van Gaal’s remarks about Messi are eerily similar to what the Dutch coach had to say about Juan Roman Riquelme – the boyhood idol of Messi – two decades ago, while the Dutchman was coaching Barcelona.

Messi clearly did not forget the treatment of his idol and found the perfect opportunity to goad Van Gaal after scoring from the spot in the second half: his hands cupped behind his ears a la Riquelme, standing still for a few seconds in front of the Dutch dugout before turning round to resume play.



Messi must have had memories piquing him from the 2014 World Cup semi-final when he was turned almost ineffectual by the Dutch, that time too coached by Van Gaal. On the Argentina bench, there was Angel di Maria,

who had claimed that Van Gaal was ‘the worst coach’ of his career, blaming the Dutchman for his frosty exit from Manchester United.

The ill feeling that had long brewed among the whole Argentine bunch towards the Dutch side blew up on the pitch through a tempestuous affair, which could very well go down in the annals of World Cup as the Battle of Lusail: one red and a record 18 yellow cards brandished, expletives thrown at the benches and benches reiterating, threatening full-blown brawls.

If Van Gaal was the pantomime villain of this drama, Messi was its hero – orchestrating the battle to his plan and taking his troops to the victory march in front of 88,000 fans, most of whom were supporting the Albiceleste.

It was not the end, though, from the Argentine genius, for he was in no mood to take any prisoners on Friday night. Following a lengthy victory lap amid the deafening cheers of their supporters, Messi still had time to have another go at the flummoxed Van Gaal before retorting to the Netherlands super-sub Wout Weghorst at the mixed zone.

He has long lived under the shadow of Diego Maradona, and despite winning every accolade in club football, including seven Ballon d’Ors, Messi received criticism every time his efforts with the Albiceleste fell short of the late legend’s achievement. Having led the team to a first Copa America title in 28 years in 2021, Messi knows this is his last chance to finally elevate him to the same echelon as Maradona’s.

At the twilight of his illustrious career, Messi is showing the world he still has the touch of a genius and he is summoning the strength of his character to defy all the odds.

In the ongoing quest, the 35-year-old and company have the blessing of Diego who, Messi says, “is watching us from heaven and pushing us.”

had too many volunteers to take penalties in the shootout that won the game.

“The team has a spirit of knowing how to face up to any situation at any time,” he said.

“They continued to show that face in a complicated, very difficult match. When you think it’s all over, it’s not over. But this team has what it takes, they have the desire, the youth, the pride, and never give up on any situation.”

Scaloni, who led Argentina to their first major trophy for nearly three decades at last year’s Copa America, said reaching the semi-finals was a great achievement but that was not the extent of their ambitions.

“It is a goal to play all seven games, but we would like to continue dancing and take the next step,” he said. “It’ll be a good match against Croatia and we hope to be up to the task.”



In a night of football madness, Croatia’s goalkeeper Dominik Livakovic lived up to the reputation of his predecessor Danijel Subasic, their hero in the journey to becoming 2018 World Cup finalists.

PHOTO: AFP



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