

‘Standout’ Alvarez complements his idol

ATIQUE ANAM *from Doha*

There was a poignant moment at the end of Argentina’s victory over Croatia. Julian Alvarez, who scored two goals in the 3-0 victory, went to his team’s dugout and was hugged by Lautaro Martinez, who was almost in tears.

Those tears that he tried to suffocate were certainly not tears of grief but of joy instead as Alvarez did what was expected of Martinez, the automatic choice in the first eleven till the second match of the campaign.

But as Martinez failed in both matches with Argentina’s fate hanging in the balance, coach Lionel Scaloni decided to throw in the 22-year-old, thus far used as a second-half substitute, in the last group game against Poland.

The Manchester City forward hadn’t quite lit the Premier League on fire, with chances few and far between in the shadows of Erling Haaland. He’s also a bit of a newcomer in the Argentina team, behind Martinez and Paulo Dybala in the pecking order. But when shown faith by the coach, Alvarez grabbed the opportunity with both hands, scoring the second goal in a 2-0 win against Poland. And he has not looked back since.

He scored one more against a sticky Australia side in the Round of 16 and then bagged a brace against Croatia on Tuesday, becoming the youngest player to score two in a World Cup semi-final or final since 17-year-old Pele in 1958.

Apart from scoring crucial goals, what Alvarez is doing is important for the team is taking the pressure off Lionel Messi. He is taking on a lot of defensive duties and allowing Messi to give his best with the ball on his feet.

Messi himself admitted Alvarez’s contribution. Although Messi got the player-of-the-match award for scoring one and setting up another against Croatia, there wouldn’t have been many arguing the choice had the award gone to the youngster.



“Today I think Julian was a standout above all else. He played an extraordinary game,” Messi said after the match. “He opened the way for us, he fought, he ran, he hit everyone. I think he was extremely important as he has been throughout the World Cup.”

An old picture has gone viral on social media since Tuesday night, that of a purportedly 12-year-old Alvarez and his mates taking a selfie with their idol – Lionel Messi. Ten years later, the fanboy and the idol are sharing the same dressing room and complementing each other, scoring and setting up goals as they carry Argentina towards the ultimate glory.



PHOTO: FIFA

ATIQUE ANAM FROM DOHA

Step aside Cristiano Ronaldo, step aside Neymar. Lionel Messi is here, and he is here for business.

With every match of this World Cup, we are witnessing what the Argentine master can do with the ball at his feet and how he can rally the team around him towards achieving the only title that eludes him – the FIFA World Cup.

The motto of the Qatar World Cup is ‘now is all’. It is difficult to imagine what the slogan actually means, but at this stage it won’t be too fanciful to think that it was aimed at the magician from Rosario, for this will definitely be his last World Cup. After leading the Albiceleste to the final of the showpiece event, Messi confirmed this after a jaw-dropping performance against Croatia in the first semi-final, scoring one and setting up another in a 3-0 win.

“I feel very happy to be able to achieve this, to finish my World Cup journey by playing my last game in a final,” Messi told Argentine media outlet Diario Deportivo Ole after the match on Tuesday.

“It’s many years for the next one and I don’t think I’ll be able to do it. And to finish like this, it’s the best,” added the Argentina captain.

Messi has indeed been playing these matches as if these were his last. At 35 years of age, he is showing the touches which made him an absolute favourite across the globe and he is stepping up as the team’s leader.

He scored the opener against Croatia from a spot kick for his fifth goal of the campaign to surpass Gabriel Batistuta as the highest scorer in World Cups for Argentina with 11 goals, while appearing in a record-equalling 25th (alongside Lothar Matthaus of

Germany) match in World Cup.

Now he has won four player-of-the-match awards in this World Cup alone, making him the player with the most player-of-the-match awards (9) in history.

It is not just the goals that Messi is coming up with, it seems every move of the team is incomplete without a magical touch from him. At this late age of his career, he is giving a lesson to defenders how not to defend. His bullying of Croatia centre-back Jasko Gvardiol throughout the entire match, and more specifically the third goal when he twisted and turned, took a pause and then twisted and turned again to tee up Julian Alvarez will go down as perhaps the standout assist of this World Cup.

Apart from a few spells in the first half when Argentina had looked a little overwhelmed by the passing of the Croats, they were the ones running the show, with Messi at the heart of every move and his teammates stepping up.

The most complete performance from Messi and the whole of the Argentina team, it looked as if the teammates were all playing for Messi and Messi was carrying Argentina to the inevitable glory.

Argentina came into this World Cup as South American champions and with a 36-match unbeaten record. The defeat against Saudi Arabia in the first match now looks like an aberration in a long string of fine performances.

After that defeat Messi was the one who spoke to the reporters at the mixed zone, saying how he believed this Argentina team could pick themselves up from dust and go all the way. Many would have laughed off the suggestion at that stage, but Messi believed and now he has the whole of his team and the whole of the world believing.



WHAT THEY SAID

“We all have to be very happy that we are able to experience this [Messi]. Just like Federer is a one-timer, this man is also so special.”

Marco van Basten, former Dutch player and coach.

“We are seeing the happiest Leo Messi of his career.”

Jorge Valdano, former Argentinian coach, player and 1986 World Cup winner.

“No words for you Leo Messi. You deserved to be World Champion before...you deserve this title for the person you are and for the wonderful football you have always played.”

Rivaldo, former Brazil player and 2002 World Cup winner.

“You never get tired of showing that you are the best in the world. Let everyone stand up to applaud everything he’s given to football. Incredible, my friend!”

Luis Suarez, Uruguay player and former Barcelona teammate of Messi.

“Nothing has changed,” referring to his tweet made in 2012 in which he wrote, “Messi is a joke. For me the best ever.”

Wayne Rooney, former England player.

“I think there’s no doubt that Messi is the best in history. It seems we say it because we are Argentines, but no. Every time he plays, he generates something. It’s a privilege that he wears the light blue and white.”

Argentina coach **Lionel Scaloni**.

Modric bows out from Qatar but not from World Cup folklore

AGENCIES

Croatia’s run to the semi-finals of a second consecutive World Cup was nothing short of remarkable for the small Balkan nation and even Tuesday’s 3-0 defeat by Argentina does not overshadow their achievements on football’s biggest stage.

At the forefront of the majority of those achievements was 37-year-old midfielder Luka Modric, who despite the defeat produced yet another top-class display in the middle of the park.

It was perhaps the international end for yet another one of football’s greatest as Modric would be on the wrong side of 40 by the time the next World Cup arrives.

The Real Madrid midfielder would feel a bit upset looking back at his international trophy cabinet as the midfielder has won everything at club level with the reigning La Liga champions, including five UEFA Champions League titles.

Despite this, for the odd four million Croatians back home, Modric would forever be an instrumental figure in the country’s footballing folklore, perhaps its greatest-ever protagonist.



The 2018 Ballon d’Or winner has been at the focal point of almost everything that Croatia has achieved since participating in the 2006 World Cup. With his instrumental genius, Modric, who has played four World Cups, has anchored the midfield for Croatia

in every major tournament, including four European Championships.

Reaching the last four in Russia and Qatar was barely conceivable six years ago. Croatia were a team in near disarray, their fans were fighting each other at Euro 2016

and the leadership of the Croatian FA faced corruption allegations.

The appointment of Ante Cacic, a former TV repairman, as head coach had only fanned the flames of discontent.

Fast forward to Qatar, where Croatia entered the tournament as 2018 runners-up with an ageing squad led by 37-year-old Luka Modric and with Zlatko Dalic, who replaced Cacic before the 2018 tournament, at the helm.

Coming through their group with a win over Canada and draws against Belgium and surprise semi-finalists Morocco, conceding only one goal along the way, the Croats showed they were again a force to be reckoned with.

They were no longer the explosive attacking team of 2018 that stunned England in the semi-finals before losing to France in the final, but Croatia matured into a well-oiled machine where each player knows what needs to be done to get the result.

Their midfield of Mateo Kovacic, Marcelo Brozovic and Modric looked so solid that teammate Josip Juranovic said it was “safer

than having money in the bank”, while 20-year-old defender Josko Gvardiol pulled the strings at the back.

Croatia got past Japan in a shootout in the Round of 16 before delivering one of the shocks of the tournament by eliminating five-time champions Brazil in the same manner.

In another display of mental toughness, Croatia had conceded an extra-time goal to Brazil’s Neymar but dug their way out of trouble by scoring a 117th-minute equaliser through Bruno Petkovic.

Before Tuesday’s 3-0 loss to Lionel Messi’s Argentina, Croatia had needed penalties or extra time in five of six knockout matches at the 2018 and 2022 World Cups.

They won all four of their penalty shootouts.

A tiny nation of four million, Croatia may not have won a World Cup but they have emerged as a major force on the global stage. With the end nearing for stalwarts like Modric, and the upcoming talents spearheading through in the form of players like Gvardiol, Croatia would feel their future is in good hands.