

‘Any team with Messi is a different proposition’

REUTERS, AL KHOR

France’s Antoine Griezmann proved once again that he is the ultimate team player with another virtuoso performance to help guide his team to a second consecutive World Cup final on Wednesday with their 2-0 win over Morocco.

Goals from Theo Hernandez and substitute Randal Kolo Muani made the difference for France but it was Griezmann’s combination of graft and guile at both ends of the pitch that caught the eye.

The Atletico Madrid forward has not scored a single goal at the World Cup in Qatar but has created several chances while



Describing Messi’s EROICA SYMPHONY

KHALID HOSSAIN

The world has long run out of superlatives to describe Lionel Messi in a new light. “Don’t describe him, just watch him,” one of Messi’s mentors Pep Guardiola had said.

It is easier said than done though. Then again, it may be less difficult to invent new words.

On that note, it was “messilicious” how Argentina’s No.10 pulled another rabbit out of his hat against Croatia, leading to the third goal – an iconic moment in World Cup history.

It can be argued that the way he assisted that goal may not rank among his best-ever, given how he operated as a playmaker in his prime years – dictated by his unique ability to accelerate, while the ball staying glued to his feet, when defenders thought he had reached top speed.

Could that goal jump up in the top hierarchy of his numerous jaw-dropping goals and assists? Perhaps no, but given the occasion and the context of the semifinal on Tuesday, the answer should be an astounding affirmative.

Argentina comfortably led two-nil past the hour mark but, as the Albiceleste have repeatedly shown in Qatar prior, this cushion happens to be a dangerous one for Messi and Co.

A World Cup final at stake, in his last dance as well, Messi took it upon himself to put the game to bed. Josko Gvardiol and the Croatia defence did little wrong during the move, but the planets had aligned; time about to stand still.

Minute 69. Messi was the furthest Argentine player with the ball in the right touchline, just above the midfield, man-marked by Gvardiol – one of the standout defenders in the tournament – supported by the experienced Dejan Lovren. Messi receives a short pass from Julian Alvarez and controls the match ball Al-Hilm on the bounce and swooshes past Gvardiol from the outside.

One touch, two touch and more, Messi and the Al-Hilm come in contact five times during his burst, with Gvardiol chased but

on a fresh pair of legs in Lovren becomes a risky move. However, he has the wisdom of an old monk these days.

If Messi is a classical music composer, he visualizes the staff notation before the melody plays in his mind. Gvardiol had operated by the textbook, preventing the threat from reaching the spine, as Messi ended up in a seemingly less dangerous position than before with his back facing the goal. Until he was not.

Messi demonstrated, as he did on numerous occasions, that silence is the canvas from which music is created.

Staying outside Gvardiol throughout the run, Croatia defence did not feel the need to call for reinforcement. But Messi knew what they did not and was about to play the game of reverse psychology to perfection.

With a dummy and a twist, he wrestled past an already-exhausted Gvardiol, who did his best to keep up though. Suddenly The Fly was well inside the box, with two passing options against three defenders, and found Alvarez between the outstretched legs of Gvardiol before the ball received its due destination as the Croatia defence, including Luka Modric, appeared to be caught ball watching.

General audience may remember Messi’s run as one of his many goals. It was not though, as for Messi, in twilight of his career, had composed his own version of the “Eroica (Heroic) Symphony” – the great Beethoven masterpiece, created following a profound crisis related to his worsening deafness.



also dropping deep and breaking up play.

Paul Pogba even suggested on Instagram that Griezmann was playing like France’s injured all-action defensive midfielder N’Golo Kante after another all-round performance against Morocco which earned the forward the man-of-the-match award.

Victory set up a mouth-watering final with Lionel Messi’s Argentina, which will take place at Lusail Stadium on Sunday.

“Any team with Messi is a different proposition. We’ve seen Argentina play, we know how they play, they’re a difficult team to play and they’re in top form,” Griezmann said.

“They have a strong side around Messi. But we’ll be well prepared.

“We can make history but there is still a very long way to go, 90 minutes or more. You have to keep your feet on the ground.”

Tables turn sharply on Tigers

SPORTS REPORTER FROM CHATTOGRAM

Bangladesh had ended the first day of the first Test on a high note as they scalped six Indian wickets but the tables had turned sharply on them by the time Day Two came to an end. What was mostly being pondered by then was how quickly India may wrap up the game after another disastrous showing from the Tigers despite a rejuvenated top-order.

The hosts were down eight wickets for 133 runs at the Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury Stadium in Chattogram, that too thanks to some rearguard resistance from in-form Mehedi Hasan Miraz and tail ender Ebadot Hossain. But defeat is looming on the horizon after just two days, with the hosts



still trailing by 271 runs and requiring 72 more runs to avoid the follow-on.

Bangladesh struck early in the day, with Ebadot casting Iyer for 86. But with Ebadot facing some back issues and leaving the field for a while, the Tigers were left frustrated by Ravichandran Ashwin and Kuldeep Yadav, who stitched together a 92-run stand for the eighth-wicket to allow India to get to 404 despite Miraz and Taijul Islam’s four-fers.

India pacer Mohammed Siraj had an immediate effect after the exchange, with Najmul Hossain Shanto nicking one to the keeper off the very first delivery. After Siraj removed Zakir Ali and Liton Das, Kuldeep came in and dismantled the middle-order to leave Bangladesh reeling.

A top-order shuffle saw Yasir Ali at number three and Liton Das at four but, even without slightly out-of-form Mahmudul Hasan Joy and the struggling Mominul Haque, the batting lacked conviction.

Rangana Herath, who had hoped to field questions on bowling, instead had to deliver opinion on batting and mentality.

“Losing eight wickets is disappointing but you know this is Test cricket and we have three days to go,” Herath said.

While Herath opined that he ‘didn’t expect that much turn’ on the surface, he felt the grit to spend time in the middle from top-order was missing.

“If you look at Pujara’s innings, he scored 90 but played lot of balls with his gritty attitude,” he said about lack of partnerships, suggesting it was not about technique or ability. Herath also informed Shakib did not bowl on second day due to shoulder pain but was expected to bowl later in the match.

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