

Sports

Jesus, Firmino send Brazil into Copa final as Messi fails again

The uneven pitch looked like it had been trampled by a herd of wildebeest

BELO HORIZONTE: Gabriel Jesus and Roberto Firmino scored the goals as Brazil beat arch-rivals Argentina 2-0 on Tuesday to qualify for the Copa America final. Jesus and Firmino netted a goal apiece in each half to give Brazil a victory which ensured Lionel Messi's frustrating wait for a major international tournament title with Argentina continued. It was the first time these age-old rivals had met in a major competition since Brazil beat Argentina 3-0 in the 2007 Copa final. English-based Jesus and Firmino were the stars, each creating the other's goal, although captain Dani Alves had a major say in the opener.

"It was another step towards our objective. We're achieving all the goals that we're setting ourselves," said Alves. "A lot of people doubt us but we have a lot of faith in ourselves, in our plan, in our hard work." "We're reaping the fruits of the seeds we're sowing every day." But it was a miserable night for Messi, whose hopes of landing a major international honor with Argentina ended in disappointment once again.

He will get another opportunity next year, though, with the fourth Copa America in the last five years, due to be played in Argentina and Colombia. "We should have been the team going to the final because we deserved it, no doubt about that. But sometimes football is unfair," complained Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni.

Tackles flying

In what was always expected to be a feisty affair there were some wild early tackles flying in, and Argentina's Nicolas Tagliafico was first to be booked for a lunge at Jesus. The uneven pitch looked like it had been trampled by a herd of wildebeest before kick-off and both sides struggled to play flowing football. Brazil's Casemiro was even jeered after sending a long crossfield ball straight out of play.

The first chance came when Argentina's Leandro Paredes let fly from 30 yards but the ball whistled just over the top of goalkeeper Alisson's goal. Brazil took the lead on 19 minutes after a piece of individual brilliance from Alves. He beat three players on a mazy run before sending Firmino clear down the right with a no-look pass, the Liverpool forward crossing for the unmarked Jesus to tap home.

Two-footed lunges were flying in as the match threatened to descend from niggly to dirty. Argentina almost leveled on the half hour when Sergio Aguero headed Messi's free-kick onto the bar, the ball bouncing down just in front of the line before Brazil scrambled it clear. Messi then burst into life, driving at heart of the Brazil defense and playing in Aguero, who took advantage of a Thiago Silva slip to make space for himself but Marquinhos was quickly across to block the Manchester City striker's shot. Moments later, Messi beat two men on the right, won back the ball with a sliding tackle after overrunning it, but then wastefully shot high and wide. At the other end, Arthur shot powerfully, but straight at goalkeeper Franco Armani.

Pirouetting Jesus

Argentina pushed Brazil back at the start of the second half and Aguero picked out Lautaro Martinez in the box but he didn't catch his left-foot volley cleanly and Alisson gathered comfortably. Another promising attacking move ended with Rodrigo de Paul blazing over from 20 yards. But Jesus produced a beautiful piece of skill, including a pirouetting drag-back, before teasing up Philippe Coutinho who should have done better than shooting over.

Moments later, though, a blocked shot from Martinez looped over to Messi who lashed a shot from an angle against the post, with Alisson beaten. Alisson



BELO HORIZONTE: Argentina's Lionel Messi (R) is marked by Brazil's Casemiro (C) and Arthur during their Copa America football tournament semi-final match at the Mineirao Stadium. —AFP

was alert to clutch a Messi free-kick on 66 minutes that looked destined for the top corner. By then, Scaloni had already gone for broke, bringing off midfielder Marcos Acuna and sending on speedy winger Angel Di Maria, with Messi dropping into a deeper role.

Just as Argentina looked capable of finding a way

back into the match, Brazil stung them on the counter-attack with Manchester City's Jesus getting away from two defenders and teeing up the unmarked Liverpool striker Firmino for a tap in on 71 minutes. Scaloni threw on another forward in Paulo Dybala but there was no way back for Argentina. —AFP

USA into World Cup final as Houghton penalty miss costs England

LYON: Alex Morgan scored what proved to be the winner but hailed goalkeeper Alyssa Naeher after her late penalty save from Steph Houghton allowed holders the United States to claim a dramatic 2-1 victory over England in their women's World Cup semi-final on Tuesday.

On her 30th birthday, USA co-captain Morgan headed home her sixth goal of the World Cup just after the half-hour mark in this last-four showdown to put her team back in front after Ellen White had cancelled out Christen Press's early opener.

But after an open first 45 minutes, the second half was dominated by more VAR controversy, with England having another White goal disallowed for the tightest of offside calls following a review by the Brazilian referee. Phil Neville's team later benefited from Edina Alves Batista's decision to award them a spot-kick when Becky Sauerbrunn made the slightest of contact with White in the box, yet Houghton's 84th-minute kick was stopped by Naeher diving low to her right.

England finished with 10 players after Millie Bright was sent off for a second yellow card late on, and the USA held out to reach the final, despite being without the injured Megan Rapinoe. "Alyssa Naeher, she should be the player of the match today. She saved our butts today," said Morgan. They will now go on to face Sweden or the Netherlands in Sunday's final, as they aim to win the trophy for the fourth time in eight editions. It is their third straight final, and they will hope to have Rapinoe back in time.

"Megan's got a slight strain to her hamstring so wasn't available today," said US coach Jill Ellis. "I feel we have a really good deep bench, so I called upon other players and I think they did a fantastic job." It is another bitterly disappointing way for



LYON: United States' forward Alex Morgan (L) is congratulated by teammates after scoring a goal during the France 2019 Women's World Cup semi-final football match between England and USA, on July 2, 2019, at the Lyon Stadium. —AFP

England to lose, as they go out of a third consecutive major tournament in the semi-finals. Their players cut dejected figures on the pitch at full-time. "Football can be cruel. We have had a fantastic ride. When we got the penalty I turned to my bench and said 'we were going to win it,' but it wasn't to be," Neville told the BBC.

Rapinoe absence not felt

Perhaps Nikita Parris should have been given the chance to make up for her penalty misses against Argentina and Norway earlier in the competition? Ellis's side will not be too worried about that, as fortune favored them. That England could not take advantage of Rapinoe's absence said much about the strength in depth available to the USA, with the excellent Press taking her place.

Unperturbed by the change, the Americans came flying out of the blocks like they have in every match at this tournament. They had scored no later than the 12th minute in all of their previous five matches, and here they required only 10 minutes to take the lead, Tobin Heath finding Kelley O'Hara whose

cross from the right was headed in by Press at the far post.

Replacing the injured Karen Bardsley in goal, Carly Telford could do nothing to stop it, and England were stunned. However, they were back level on 19 minutes as Beth Mead's pinpoint delivery picked out White and she steered the ball in off the frame of the goal for her sixth of the tournament. Yet it was the holders who went back in front just after the half-hour, Morgan stealing in front of Demi Stokes and heading home Lindsey Horan's delivery. She celebrated by miming sipping on a cup of tea.

As the USA tried to soak up pressure in the second half, England thought they were level in the 68th minute when Jill Scott's flick picked out White to score, but VAR denied them the equalizer and her a seventh goal of the tournament. Yet even when VAR came to their rescue, England failed to capitalize, and Bright's late sending-off for a second yellow card as she scythed down Morgan summed up their frustration. They must now try to lift themselves for the third-place play-off on Saturday. —AFP

Tunisia, South Africa complete Cup of Nations last-16 line-up

CAIRO: Tunisia and South Africa filled the final two places in the Africa Cup of Nations last-16 draw Tuesday after a tense finish to the group stage in Egypt. Already-qualified Mali defeated Angola 1-0 in Ismailia through an Amadou Haidara thunderbolt to win Group E and eliminate the losers from the competition.

Tunisia, ranked second in Africa behind Senegal, could only draw 0-0 with debutants Mauritania in Suez but the point secured second place behind Mali. Mali won the group with seven points followed by Tunisia with three and Angola and Mauritania with two each. Angola losing meant South Africa sneaked into the knockout phase, joining Guinea, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Benin as the best four third-place teams.

Mali will face the Ivory Coast in the round of 16 while Tunisia meet Ghana, who are chasing a seventh consecutive top-four finish in the Cup of Nations. Highlight of the round is the clash of defending champions Cameroon and Nigeria, who have won the competition

eight times between them. Hosts Egypt, Algeria and Morocco, the three countries who finished first in groups with perfect three-win records, all face opponents who came third.

Mohamed Salah-inspired Egypt meet South Africa in a fixture sure to fill the 75,000-capacity Cairo International Stadium this Saturday. Morocco face Benin in Cairo Friday in the first of the eight last-16 fixtures and Algeria tackle Kenya Sunday, also in the Egyptian capital.

Fairytale qualifiers

Fairytale qualifiers Madagascar stay in Alexandria, where they stunned three-time former champions Nigeria to win Group B, for a showdown with DR Congo. Boosted by a Sadio Mane brace against Kenya, Senegal will face another east African nation, Uganda, for a quarter-finals place. In Ismailia, Mali made eight changes from the team that drew against Tunisia with captain Abdoulay Diaby and ace striker Moussa Marega among those on the bench. —AFP



SUEZ: Tunisia's defender Oussema Haddadi (up) fights for the ball with Mauritania's defender El Mostapha Diaw during the 2019 Africa Cup of Nations (CAN) Group E football match between Mauritania and Tunisia at the Suez Stadium. —AFP

Tottenham smash transfer record on Ndombele

LONDON: Tottenham smashed their club transfer record on Tuesday with the signing of French international midfielder Tanguy Ndombele from Lyon for a fee that could rise to 70 million euros (\$79 million, £63 million). Lyon confirmed that the initial fee will be 60 million euros with 10 million euros more in add-ons. Tottenham's previous record deal was the £42 million (\$53 million) they spent on defender Davinson Sanchez in 2017.

"We are delighted to announce the signing of Tanguy Ndombele," Tottenham said in a statement. "The France international central

midfielder has signed a contract with the Club until 2025." Ndombele's arrival came just hours after Spurs made their first signing in 18 months by securing teenage winger Jack Clarke from Leeds. Clarke, 18, will spend next season back on loan at Leeds in the Championship.

However, securing Ndombele, a player coveted by a host of top clubs around Europe, is a sign of intent from Tottenham, who moved into a new 62,000 capacity stadium last season. Spurs boss Mauricio Pochettino has challenged the club to match his ambition after reaching the Champions League final for the first time.

"We need to make that step," Pochettino said after finishing fourth in the Premier League. "We realize we can continue in this process, we can put Tottenham with the best teams in the world." Pochettino has transformed Spurs' fortunes in five years in charge with next season a fourth consecutive cam-

paign in the Champions League. However, the Argentine is yet to win a trophy in his managerial career.

Tottenham have been in need of midfield reinforcements since Mousa Dembele's move to China in January. Ndombele, 22, starred as Lyon reached the last 16 of the Champions League last season and finished third in Ligue 1. The fee represents a massive profit for the French side, who bought Ndombele from Amiens for only eight million euros 12 months ago after a successful season on loan at Lyon.

"OL thanks @T_Ndombele for his involvement with the club since his arrival in 2017 and congratulates him for his professionalism and his performances which have enabled him to join the French national team," Lyon said in a statement on Twitter. Ndombele made 96 appearances in total for Lyon, scoring four goals and providing 16 assists, and has been capped six times by world champions France. —AFP

Mexico end Haiti fairytale to reach final

PHOENIX: Mexico booked their place in the final of the CONCACAF Gold Cup on Tuesday after a controversial penalty in extra-time handed them a 1-0 win over Caribbean minnows Haiti. Haiti, who had stunned Canada with a come-from-behind 3-2 victory in the quarter-finals, threatened to pull off another shock after a battling defensive display frustrated the seven-time Gold Cup winners.

But after holding Mexico to 0-0 through 90 minutes, Haiti were undone with a harsh penalty early in extra time at the State Farm Stadium in Phoenix, Arizona. The flashpoint came in the sec-

ond minute of extra-time when Haiti defender Jems Geffard was adjudged to have shoved striker Raul Jimenez in the area. Wolves striker Jimenez flopped to the floor and the referee pointed to the spot despite protests from Haiti's players.

Jimenez then dusted himself down and calmly sent Johnny Placide the wrong way with his spot-kick as Mexico breathed a collective sigh of relief. Mexico goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa was barely tested all game, but was given a late scare when a curling effort from Haiti substitute Mikael Cantave crashed off the cross bar in the 119th minute. The defeat was cruel on Haiti, who failed to qualify for the tournament in 2017 and had never gone further than the quarter-finals in six previous appearances since the tournament was rebooted in 1991. Mexico meanwhile will advance to the final at Chicago's Soldier Field on Sunday where they will face either the United States or Jamaica. —AFP