

Sports

Di Maria winner puts Argentina on brink of WC qualification

Argentina could qualify with will over Brazil Tuesday

MONTEVIDEO: Angel Di Maria's goal on Friday put Argentina on the verge of qualifying for next year's World Cup in Qatar as Lionel Messi was on the bench for the 1-0 win away to Uruguay. Messi was only called upon by coach Lionel Scaloni to play the final quarter of an hour as he made his comeback from knee and hamstring issues that saw him miss Paris Saint-Germain's last two matches.



Uruguay in World Cup playoff spot

Di Maria's sublime early finish at the Campeon del Siglo stadium in Montevideo was the difference between the sides in a match dominated by Uruguay. The result means Argentina — who are unbeaten in 26 matches — will qualify for the World Cup finals if they beat Brazil on Tuesday and any one of Colombia, Chile or Uruguay fail to win.

"This team has great courage and when you don't play well, you still have to win," said Argentina goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez. "Winning today was a huge step. We deserve it because we work very hard." The defeat left Uruguay in a World Cup playoff spot, behind

Colombia and Chile in the final two automatic qualification position on goal difference.

Nahitan Nandez should have given Uruguay a fifth minute lead after Argentina failed to deal with a long throw into the box. A ricochet saw the ball land at Nandez's feet seven yards from goal and while Martinez did well to come out quickly and spread himself, Nandez's finish was poor and straight at the Aston Villa stopper.

Uruguay were made to pay two minutes later as Paulo Dybala robbed a dawdling Joaquin Piquerez just outside the box and passed inside for Di Maria to stroke a glorious shot into the top corner. It was Argentina's only shot at goal in the first half. Luis Suarez provided Uruguay's main threat, as he has done so many times before, and fired a free-kick narrowly over.

On the half hour he hit an instinctive volley against the post before snatching at the rebound with his left foot and putting it wide. Uruguay were piling on the pressure and Matias Vecino had a chance to restore parity at the end of the first half but shot too close to Martinez.

After the break, Argentina continued to control possession without creating chances, while Uruguay were more dangerous, but without testing Martinez. Substitute Papu Gomez finally got off Argentina's second shot, just before the hour mark, but it flashed wide, while Martinez had to backpedal to tip over a wayward Facundo Torres cross that looked like it was dipping in behind the goalkeeper's head.—AFP



MONTEVIDEO: Argentina's Angel Di Maria (11) celebrates with teammates after scoring against Uruguay during their South American qualification football match for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022, at the Campeon del Siglo stadium in Montevideo on Friday. — AFP

Pulisic, McKennie on target as US sink Mexico

LOS ANGELES: Christian Pulisic and Weston McKennie scored the goals as the United States downed Mexico 2-0 to move to the top of CONCACAF's 2022 World Cup qualifying race on Friday. Chelsea star Pulisic nodded home a 74th-minute cross from Timothy Weah just five minutes after coming on as a second-half substitute to put the Americans 1-0 up in Cincinnati.

Juventus's McKennie then made the game safe five

minutes from time, sweeping a low finish past Mexico goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa after Weah's deflected low cross caused confusion in the Mexican area. A late red card for Miles Robinson after a second bookable offence left the US down to 10 men for the closing stages, but US coach Gregg Berhalter's young side were not to be denied.

The win leaves the United States on top of the eight-team final round of CONCACAF standings with 14 points from seven games. The top three finishers in the standings qualify automatically for next year's finals in Qatar, while the fourth place team advances to an inter-continental playoff.

Friday's win means the US are firmly on course to exorcise the ghost of their 2018 World Cup qualifying debacle, when they failed to reach the finals in a devastating blow for US football. It also completed a clean

sweep of victories by the US over Mexico in 2021 following wins over 'El Tri' in the CONCACAF Nations League final and Gold Cup final. "It was incredible, the fans really came out tonight and moments like that are what we live for," US goalscorer Pulisic said.

'A crazy game'

"US-Mexico you know what you're going to get - it was a crazy game for sure, that's what we expected. They were tough to break down and I'm happy I could come in and help us out. We're happy with where we are now. We've got a lot of games left to play and this is just one step closer to get us to the World Cup."

The US had struggled to get a foothold in the game during an error-strewn first-half performance, and had Manchester City reserve goalkeeper Zack Steffen to thank for two crucial saves to deny Mexico. Steffen rescued the US in the 12th minute, diving to his right to turn a goal-bound Edson Alvarez shot from the edge of the area around the post.

Steffen then pulled off another fine save after Alvarez's clever through-ball released Hirving Lozano. Lozano looked certain to score but Steffen spread himself to snuff out the danger. Those were the best Mexican chances of the game, and the US came out in the second half looking far more threatening.

McKenzie almost opened the scoring on 49 minutes but saw his shot tipped over by Ochoa, and Ricardo Pepi should have done better on 54 minutes but scooped his shot over the bar. The growing US pressure told soon after Pulisic's introduction, the forward heading home Weah's cross to make it 1-0, sparking wild celebrations among the home crowd.

In other games on Friday, Canada boosted their chances of a first World Cup appearance since 1986 after a 1-0 win over Costa Rica in Edmonton. Jonathan David's 57th-minute goal sealed a win which leaves Canada in third place in the table with 13 points, just one off the lead.

Panama, bidding to repeat their 2018 World Cup appearance, also reignited their challenge with an improbable 3-2 away win over Honduras. Honduras looked to be cruising to victory after goals from Alberth Elis and Brayan Moya left them 2-0 up with 13 minutes remaining.—AFP

Salah launches comeback as Egypt reach final qualifying stage

JOHANNESBURG: A brilliant assist by Egypt captain Mohamed Salah triggered a comeback that earned a 2-2 World Cup draw in Angola on Friday, and a place in the final African qualifying stage. The Liverpool star pushed the ball between two defenders and onrushing Arsenal midfielder Mohamed Elneny slammed the ball into the net to halve an Angolan lead to 2-1 by the interval. Akram Tawfik equalised with a deflected shot just before the hour and the draw gave Egypt an unassailable four-point lead over Gabon in Group F with one round remaining.

Meanwhile, Group A leaders Algeria extended an unbeaten run in competitive and friendly matches to 32 by hammering Djibouti 4-0 in Group A in Cairo with recent West Ham recruit Said Benrahma among the goals. Algeria surpassed the African record of the Ivory Coast in June and now have their sights on the 37-match world record set by Italy this year. In Luanda, Helder Costa, the Leeds United winger on loan to Valencia, gave Angola a lead that doubled when M'Bala Nzola converted a penalty.

Salah, who won the Premier League Player of the Month and Goal of the Month awards on Friday, was the center of attention with several spectators racing on to the pitch during the match seeking selfies. South Africa-born Egypt assistant coach Roger de Sa hailed the two-time African Footballer of the Year, calling Salah "a respectful professional who is a pleasure to work with. He is one of the best footballers in the world, but so humble. His behavior in the build-up to the Angola match was exemplary."

The only disappointment for the Liverpool sharpshooter was seeing a personal goal drought stretch to four matches after scoring in 10 consecutive games. He even found time during the match to act as a peacemaker after a scuffle close to the Egypt bench threatened to get out of hand soon after his side levelled.

Coach Queiroz pushed

Salah calmed his teammates and opponents after Egypt coach and former Real Madrid manager and Manchester United assistant Carlos Queiroz was pushed by an Angolan player. The closing stages were incident free with both teams seemingly satisfied with a point as Egypt moved closer to a fourth World Cup appearance. They were invited to the 1934 tournament in Italy and qualified for the 1990 finals in the same country and the 2018 edition in Russia.

Egypt are the fourth group winners after Senegal, Morocco and Mali to secure places in two-leg play-offs next March that will decide which five African teams go to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. The remaining six places will be decided by Tuesday with African champions Algeria, Nigeria, Tunisia set to make it.

Ivory Coast and Cameroon, South Africa and Ghana and Benin and the Democratic Republic are locked in two-team battles to win the other sections. Morocco are the only team boasting a perfect record in the group stage with a 3-0 'away' win over Sudan in Rabat giving them 15 points from five Group I outings. Ryan Mmaee bagged a brace before Imran Louza from Premier League outfit Watford completed the scoring in added time.

It was a home fixture for Sudan, but the east African nation lack an international-standard stadium and moved the game to the Moroccan capital. Another Premier League forward to score was Arsenal talisman Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, whose penalty earned Gabon a 1-0 win over Libya in Franceville.

A Burkina Faso side severely depleted by injuries to forwards fell two points behind Algeria after being held 1-1 by Niger while Guinea remain winless in Group I after a 0-0 home draw with Guinea-Bissau. Leading scorer Abdoul Tapsoba and Aston Villa forward Bertrand Traore were among the Burkinaabe absentees in Marrakech. — AFP



CINCINNATI: Christian Pulisic #10 of the United States heads the ball past Guillermo Ochoa #13 of Mexico for a goal during the second half of the FIFA World Cup 2022 Qualifier match at TQL Stadium on Friday in Cincinnati, Ohio. — AFP

GAZOO Racing celebrates spectacular WEC World Championship win

MANAMA: GAZOO Racing (GR) completed its history-making hypercar season in style with a one-two victory in the 8 Hours of Bahrain on a day of destiny for the 2021 FIA World Endurance Championship (WEC) Drivers' Championship crown. An emotional finale to the season saw Kazuki Nakajima bring the curtain down on his glittering endurance career in style, with victory in the No 8 G-Drive Hybrid Electric Vehicle (HEV) he shares with teammates Sebastien Buemi and Brendon Hartley.

Meanwhile, Le Mans winners Mike Conway, Kamui Kobayashi and Jose Maria Lopez retained the Drivers' Championship title by finishing second during the sixth and final round of the season in the No 7 G-Drive HEV. Kobayashi is now Japan's first two-time World Champion on four wheels, while Lopez becomes only the second Argentinian to win five FIA World Championships.

On a day of new milestones, GR became the first team to win every race in a WEC season. The team extended its unprecedented winning run to nine in its 70th event since first entering the series in 2012. The last two events of the season took place over two consecutive weekends in Bahrain following the cancellation of round five in Fuji due to ongoing travel restrictions related to COVID-19. Victory during the first weekend of the Bahrain double-header meant Toyota had already secured its fourth Manufacturer's Championship title before the final race began.

Despite clean sweeps in all round five sessions, the G-Drive HEVs played catch-up during the opening laps of the season finale. However, some exciting wheel-to-

wheel racing put the team back in front and they never looked back. As the race moved into the night, the No 8 G-Drive HEV established an ever-stronger grip at the front. Nakajima took the wheel for the final stint, and his last laps in the WEC. A journey which started with the roll-out of the TS030 HYBRID in January 2012 ended when Nakajima took the chequered flag 7.351secs ahead of Lopez, whose second place delivered another world title to the No 7 G-Drive HEV crew.

Akio Toyoda, President, Toyota Motor Corporation, commented: "First of all, congratulations on the team championship! We won all six races in the first year of Hypercar, and were able to run through with the tremendous efforts of the drivers and team. I am really grateful that these two cars have become champion cars. To Kamui, Mike, and Jose, congratulations on winning Le Mans and the Drivers' Championship. It is very nice! Thanks to the partners who supported the battle in the new Hypercar class and the fans who con-

tinued to support us. Thank you for fighting with us this season."

Over the years, Toyota has been participating in many different forms of motorsports, including Formula One, the World Endurance Championship (WEC), and the Nurburgring 24 hours endurance race. Toyota's participation in these events was overseen by separate entities within the company until April 2015, when Toyota established GR, to consolidate all of its motorsports activities under one in-house brand. Representing Toyota's belief that 'the roads build the people, and the people build the cars,' GR highlights the role of motorsports as a fundamental pillar of Toyota's commitment to making 'ever-better' cars. Harnessing years of experience gained under the extreme conditions of various motorsports events, GR aims to forge new technologies and solutions that bring the freedom, adventure, and joy of driving to everyone.

