

Messi, Messi, Messi; his 3 goals lift Argentina to World Cup



QUITO (ECUADOR), OCT 11 /- When it really mattered and when the pressure was most intense, Lionel Messi delivered for Argentina. On the brink of being eliminated from World Cup qualifying for the first time in almost five decades, Messi scored all three goals in Argentina's comeback 3-1 victory Tuesday at Ecuador overcoming the thin air in the Andes. "It would've been crazy if Argentina didn't play the World Cup," said Messi, adding that the team "will change, will grow a lot, will be stronger after this." But there's still work to do for Argentina, the two-time champions, who lost the final three years ago to Germany 1-0. Messi has yet to

hoist a major trophy for his country of birth, a contrast to the laurels he's brought Barcelona. He'll turn 31 during the World Cup in Russia, so this may be his last chance. "Messi does not owe Argentina a World Cup, but rather football owes him a World Cup," Argentine coach Jorge Sampaoli said. The top four teams in South America get automatic spots at next year's tournament in Russia. Brazil has 41 points and clinched months ago. The other three advancing Tuesday went in this order: Uruguay (31), Argentina (28) and Colombia (27). Uruguay beat Bolivia 4-2, Argentina won 3-1, Colombia drew 1-1 with Peru and last-place Venezuela beat Paraguay 1-0. Peru (26) placed fifth and will keep alive its bid for a first World Cup appearance since 1982 after edging Chile for the South American spot in the inter-continental playoff next month against Oceania representative New Zealand. On a dramatic last day of continental qualifying tournaments, six South American

teams separated by only four points over 17 matches had shots at the World Cup entering play Chile, after a 3-0 loss to Brazil, and Paraguay missed out. Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador were already out of contention. There was a major shock further north in the Americas with the US slipping from third spot to fifth in CONCACAF qualifying for teams in North and Central America and the Caribbean with a loss in Trinidad and missing out on the World Cup. Panama secured the third automatic direct entry behind Mexico and Costa Rica, and Honduras finished fourth and secured a spot in a playoff against Australia. It looked easy for Argentina. But it wasn't, particularly after Romario Ibarra gave Ecuador a 1-0 lead in the first minute at 2,850 meters (9,350 feet) in Ecuador's capital. "Even with a goal against us you could see the certainty of a team that knew how to play the game," Sampaoli said. Messi for sure, and running mate Angel Di Maria. Messi scored off a pass from Di

Maria in the 12th, left-footing home from close range. In the 20th, Di Maria slipped a pass through to Messi, who drove the ball into the top corner from 15 yards. Messi got his third in the 62nd, weighting a perfect 18-yard shot that went in just over the fingers of Ecuador keeper Maximiliano Banaguera. Argentina had scored only one goal in its last four qualifying games, and only 16 in 17 qualifiers entering the final. "I won't make any promises," said Sampaoli, the third coach in this qualifying cycle for Argentina. The Argentine was successful as Chile's coach, and at Spanish club Sevilla. He also knows he had a little edge on a short guy named Messi, or "La Pulga" in Spanish the flea. "The nationality of the best player in the world is luckily Argentinian," he said.

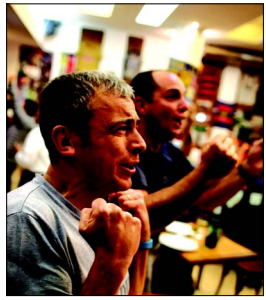
COLOMBIA AND PERU Colombia advanced with a 1-1 draw in Lima, Peru. The result also put Peru into a playoff in November with New Zealand for a spot in Russia. James Rodriguez gave Colombia a 1-0 lead in the 56th, but Peru's Paolo Guerrero equalized in the 76th to give Peru a chance. "We're fifth," so we get the playoff," Herrera said. "We could have done a bit more, but the big thing we can think of is the playoff."

CHILE OUT Two-time defending South American champion Chile needed to win to get its third straight World Cup berth, but Brazil wrecked that with a 3-0 victory. Peru's 1-1 draw also removed any chance of Chile slipping in. Gabriel Jesus scored twice and Paulinho got the other. It was the 12th consecutive unbeaten qualifying game since Tite has been in charge of the Brazilian team. He took over more than a year ago from Dunga.

URUGUAY SET Uruguay was a cinch to advance. It did with style, beating Bolivia 4-2. Luis Suarez scored twice with the other goals coming from Martin Caceres and Edinson Cavani. (AP)

'Thank God for Messi' says relieved Argentina

It's complicated, I want the team to be at the World Cup in Russia, but only a miracle can save them. I'm going to pray for them



Argentine fans reacts after Lionel Messi scored his second goal — REUTERS

BUENOS AIRES, OCT 11 /- A nation exploded with relief on Tuesday as Lionel Messi single-handedly dragged his Argentina team into next year's World Cup. He scored his second goal in Quito. "Messi is E.T. He's from another planet. He's not from this world," Marco Mouras, a 28-year-old Brazilian said in a crowded Buenos Aires bar as Argentinians around him went wild, beer and pizza spilling onto the floor. Messi gave the world a masterclass of what it would be missing if he didn't go to Russia 2018, a distinct possibility when Argentina was a goal down inside the first minute of a match they had to win. A grave-yard silence descended on bars, restaurants and homes when Ecuador's Romario Ibarra struck in the first minute of the game, casting a pall of gloom across Argentina as he scored. It was proof for Argentinians that this team was a lost cause. Argentinians had suffered too much during a lacklustre qualification series and this was the last straw. But Messi burst through the gloom to equalize and then soon scored again to give Argentina the lead. "2-1 was not enough. We couldn't be calm," said Luis Gonzalez, 35, celebrating after being put through an emotional wringer by his national team. Beside him a disbelieving Maximiliano Lacasa proclaimed himself a devotee of "Saint Messi. Thank God we have him." Pride in the shirt was restored when Messi completed his hat-trick in the second half. It was time for Argentinians at home to believe again. Pablo Ramos, 34, could hardly take it in. The team is still a misfiring mess going to the World Cup, he said, "so it's all suffering." Even music yielded to Messi when Irish rockers U2 delayed their concert by almost two hours to allow fans in the La Plata stadium near Buenos Aires time to watch the match on giant screens. When they finally came on stage, they kicked off a giant party. With seemingly everyone crowded around every available TV set, the streets of Buenos Aires were so empty it seemed like a curfew. People wore the Argentine national shirt in the build-up, but many of the Argentine public had grown tired of believing in vain. A win seemed a little too fanciful to most, exasperated by a series of underwhelming performances by the national side. Only a win would do. In Quito, where Argentina hadn't won since 2001. The nation held its breath. Nobody here, or anywhere else, wanted to contemplate the unthinkable but they were real prospect of Argentina losing. That would mean next year's World Cup in Russia would go ahead without Messi, arguably the world's greatest player.



England qualify for round of 16

ENGLAND : 3 (R. BREWSTER (39) P. FODEN (48) J. SANCHO (55 PEN))
MEXICO : 2 (D. LAINEZ (65) D. LAINEZ (72))



U17 World Cup match between England and Mexico at Salt Lake Stadium in Kolkata on Wednesday — Shyamal Maitra

KOLKATA, OCT 11 /- England beat Mexico 3-2 in their second match of the FIFA U-17 World Cup at the Salt Lake Stadium Kolkata to qualify for the round of 16. Jadon Sancho, Philip Foden and Rhian Brewster scored for the Young Lions while Diego Lainez netted a brace for Mexico. Manchester United starlet Angel Gomes had to start on the bench once again today as England manager Steve Cooper did not make any change in the winning combination. He fielded his team in a 4-2-3-1 formation while Mario Artega too fielded an unchanged XI in a 4-2-2 formation. The Young Lions were off to a flying start, creating as many as three chances within first 10 minutes. Jadon Sancho and Rhian Brewster failed to score from handshaking distances in the fourth and fifth minute. Mexico's first major chance came in the 16th minute when last match goal scorer Diego Lainez dribbled inside the box and attempted a shot at goal but goalkeeper Curtis Anderson was on hand

to deny him. The energy with which England started their game completely melted down after the first 15 minutes. It was mostly a battle of the midfielders for the next 20 minutes. At the 37th minute Callum Hudson came close to scoring his second goal of the tournament but was denied by El Tiri custodian Cesar Lopez. England won a free-kick just after this move at the edge of the penalty box. Liverpool starlet Rhian Brewster then converted with a stunning free-kick which went straight into the goal handing England the opening goal. The teams went into halftime with the scoreline flashing 1-0 in the Young Lions' favour. Mexico were expected to go all out in the second half but instead England doubled and tripled their lead within the first six minutes of the second half. Sancho played a neat one-two with substitute Angel Gomes on the left side of the penalty box and created a chance for Philip Foden who calmly found the back of the net. The third goal was scored by none other than England star Jadon

Sancho from the penalty spot after Mexican captain Carlos Robles handled the ball in the box. At that point, it seemed all over for the Boys in Green. The drama unfolded in the 64th minute when Diego Lainez pulled one back for his side. It was a complete howler from the English defence and Lainez took full advantage. Lainez scored another one in the 71st minute from Roberto De La Rosa's assist to increase the excitement of 40,000 people present at the stadium. Mexico thereafter launched series of attacks and came close to scoring the equaliser on several occasions. Roberto De La Rosa's miss in the 84th minute was the most notable one as he failed to find the back of the net with a header after he found himself unmarked inside the six yards box with just Anderson in front of him. Ultimately it was heartbreak for crowd favourites Mexico who played their hearts out in the last 30 minutes of the match. England at the end of the day heads home with full three points and also qualify for the round of 16.

High-spirited India brace up for tough Ghana challenge

NEW DELHI, OCT 11 /- Their transformation from rank outsiders to valiant fighters drawing all-round praise for their performance in the Under-17 World Cup, here tomorrow. Not many had given India any chance against Colombia after their 0-3 loss to United States in their opening match but the home side put up an inspired performance, showing that the country can compete against the best in the world. Coach Luis Norton de Matos' defensive gameplan was executed to near perfection by his players against Colombia and the tournament debutants would have eked out a win had a bit of luck gone their way. Colombia largely dominated the match but as de Matos later asserted, the outcome of that game could have been different had India taken the lead in the first half. It could have happened if Rahul Kannoly's first half stoppage time volley had not hit the post. With the expectations now rising, de Matos and his boys would be aiming to show that the performance against Colombia was no fluke and they were worthy competitors in this global showpiece, where they were automatic qualifiers as hosts. But it will not be easy for them as Ghana are the most physical team in the group. No doubt, the two-time former champions Ghana will start as clear favourites in tomorrow's final Group A match at the Jawahar Lal Nehru Stadium. Even a win for India, which is unlikely though not improbable, is not expected to take them to the knock-out stage as USA have already booked a round of 16 berth while Colombia and Ghana are on three points each.

Without any point so far, India have conceded five goals and scored once to have a goal difference - which will decide the group rankings if two or more teams have equal points - of minus four, the least among the four teams in the group. With a nearly non-existent youth development system in the country and hence a small pool of talented youngsters, de Matos built a team in seven months after he took charge in March. And from the beginning he has been rightly saying that India have a slim chance of winning each of the three group matches. Understandably, he had to devise a defensive gameplan and banking on counter attacks through quick transition to offensive mode. De Matos knows that it is easier said than done

the previous match but played the whole 90 minutes without any problem. Boris Singh and Sanjeev Stalin are expected to do the starting line-up as right and left full-backs respectively. Boris, who returned to the side after missing out the match against USA, did a good job against Colombia and he was the supplier of the Rahul Kannoly volley that thudded the goalpost. Stalin was the one who took the corner kick from which Jeakson Singh scored India's first World Cup goal. De Matos has a lot of options in the midfield as he has packed the squad with players who can play in these positions. Defensive midfielder Jeakson is expected to continue in the first eleven as his six feet two inches frame will be needed against a physically superior Ghanaians. Ghana, who beat Colombia but lost to USA, would be looking for a win in the round of 16 as that will ensure them a top two finish in the group.

- The Teams (From):**
India: Dheeraj Singh, Prabhsukhan Gill, Sunny Dhalviwal, Boris Singh, Jitendra Singh, Anwar Ali, Sanjeev Stalin, Hendry Antonyan, Namit Deshpande, Suresh Singh, Nintinogamba Meetei, Amraj Singh, Kiyam, Abhijit Sarkar, Komal Thatal, Lalengmawia, Jeakson Singh, Nongdamba Norren, Rahul Kannoly, Praveen, Md. Shahjahan, Rahim Ali, Aniket Jadhav.
- Ghana: Ibrahim Danladi, Michael Acquaye, Kwame Aziz, Njaneeb Yakubu, Gideon Mensah, Blismark Terry Owusu, Edmund Arko-Mensah, Abdul Razak Yusuf, Gideon Acquah, Rashid Alhassan, John Odu, Isaac Gyamfi, Gabriel Leveah, Ibrahim Sulley, Mohammed Kudus, Emmanuel Toku, Mahammed Kudus, Fakir Aiyih, Richard Danso, Mohammed Aminu, Ibrahim Sadiq, (PTI)
- Match Starts at 8pm.