

# Argentina 1 v 1 Paraguay

*How does a goalkeeper pick up a yellow card near the HALFWAY LINE in the first half for almost chopping an opponent in half? Clue: He's playing for Argentina, a team in complete and total disarray.*

There was a feeling before this game that it was make-or-break for Messi's troubled relationship with Argentina. Lose this and it's probably all over. At last. The man who turns into God when he plays for Barcelona has never been able to reproduce the same otherworldly magic for his country who are desperate for just 90 minutes of it right now. They'll take anything at this point - one of his show-stopping free kicks, a dribble that leaves 3 defenders tied in knots, or even just a shimmy. That would be a start. It's not amazing but it's a start.

Against Colombia they saw him miss an open net.

After that game, Messi was accused of not showing up, while ESPN pundit Craig Burley said that he "looks like he's had enough with Argentina." Messi himself said that that defeat would take a long time to get over.

He has had enough, though - we all have. This isn't a terrible Argentina side but it's an average one. They reached the World Cup final in 2014, but you wonder how on earth they managed it after only scoring once in normal time after the group stage. The superstars - the Messi's, the Higuain's, the Di Maria's and the Dybala's (who has even gone on record as saying he finds it hard to play alongside Messi) - just do not gel together on the pitch. At the World Cup 2018, they escaped through their group but were well-beaten by France in the round of 16.

Ultimately, it's an Argentina side that needs to start all over again, and it would benefit from Messi's second retirement. That would help to wipe the slate clean. That would help everyone get some closure, admit the dream is never going to come true, and move on. That Messi era - that deeply problematic era that promised so much glory, and which saw the likes of Carlos Tevez come and go - would be laid to rest at last and the rebuilding process can begin.

Because the thing is, Argentina are one of the most iconic sides in International football and we all deserve better. Any true football fan wants Argentina to do well. They're

embedded in the romance of football. We want them to have their fiery passion, flamboyance, mystique, craft, guile and a touch of the divine back. We want them to have their swagger back. Heck, at this point we'd even take a bit of South American tempestuousness and gamesmanship from them. This current incarnation has none of that. Instead it has indifference and apathy - and these are two of the worst traits any human, let alone a sports team, can have.

Sure, we still get excited every time Argentina open a tournament, but we quickly realise there was nothing to get excited about. Excitement soon turns to disappointment. And then Argentina exit, amidst disbelief and a chorus of boos.

Of course, there's more to it for Messi. He's not just Messi in his home country - he's meant to be the Messiah. With that comes a terrible burden. There are rumours he's disenchanted, not just with his teammates but with the whole Argentinian federation. He has the whole country on his shoulders. With each loss, the blame is placed at his feet. Maradona always has his say. And now it looks like - once again - he's ready to call it quits. Who can blame him?

With all that in mind, what were we going to get against Paraguay last night, in what was a must-not-lose game for Argentina? Temp manager Scaloni rang the changes, the most glaring being Aguero's omission. He was dropped in favour of Martinez, a 21-year-old Inter Milan striker who has 7 caps and 4 goals to his name. LoCelso was also brought in, an exciting 23-year-old attacking midfielder who was recently signed on a permanent basis by Real Betis, but who is wanted by Spurs and Man Utd.

If the changes were meant to serve as a wake-up call, they worked initially. Argentina started on the front foot, determined to impress themselves on the game and get an early goal. It was hardly surprising; they were under pressure to attack from the get-go after their overly cautious approach against Colombia backfired spectacularly.

After some early spirited running, however, it wasn't long before Paraguay - spearheaded by their big, bruising, pony-tailed centre forward Santander - settled into the game. Argentina's early urgency seemed almost like a token effort and they started to play within themselves again. Within the space of a few minutes, they chopped down two Paraguayan's, leaving one in a heap of blood and requiring treatment.

The game was suddenly beginning to look bitty, and the huge, heaving crowd - most of whom were standing and had clearly moved forward to get closer to the pitch - was beginning to get agitated. Before the game, the Argentina camp had made a lot of noise

about how their confidence is now back and how everyone on the pitch knows what's expected of them. By the twenty minute mark, however, no one seemed sure once again. Passes to Messi weren't finding him and you sensed that Paraguay realised Argentina really were vulnerable and there for the taking if they just bided their time.

Newcastle's record signing Miguel Almiron was starting to have some influence on the game, Messi was scowling, while a deflection from Otamendi - who was otherwise keeping the big lad Santander in his pocket - gave his keeper work to do. Paraguay were quietly ruffling feathers. 30 minutes in and it was they were who playing some good, patient possession football. Argentina, in contrast, were really struggling. Their arch rivals Brazil had stuttered to a 0-0 with Venezuela the night before, but Argentina were in no position to mock them. They had problems of their own.

It almost got worse. Paraguay's Gonzales flashed a shot at goal but a deflection took it just wide. There were bated breaths everywhere. From the corner, Rojas latched onto a free ball at the far post and should have scored.

Then came the moment Argentina had been waiting for. A Messi free kick. It was within range - about 25 yards out. The referee marked ten yards out for the wall, Messi prepared himself - but the effort was tame.

Then came the moment they were dreading. On 35 minutes, the scintillating Almiron burst down the left wing. It was an electric run but just when it looked like he'd knocked the ball too far, he stretched out his long, *long* left leg and scooped the ball back to the edge of the box, where it fell invitingly to Sanchez, who used the momentum of the cross to fizz the ball it into the bottom corner. It was a cracking goal and one that was hardly unexpected by this point.

Argentina were rattled and were losing their shape. Santander should have punished them further but fluffed his lines. Not that it seemed to matter too much at this point. Argentina were all over the place and creating their own downfall. Their keeper inexplicably ran so far out of his area on the stroke of half-time that he found himself almost on the halfway line. His bad touch caused him to foul a Paraguayan and pick up a booking. If the Argentinians watching this debacle weren't laughing, they were definitely crying.

At half time, though, you tried to find hope amidst the chaos. They had Messi, of course. They also had LoCelso, who looked sharp, inventive and capable of doing *something*. There were options on the bench, too - Aguero, Dybala among others.

But there were only two things that were certain at this point: The Argentinians in the crowd picked up by the cameras looked distraught and resigned to an early exit. Paraguay's team, on the other hand, looked dangerous and capable of scoring more.

And so the second half began with Messi emerging from the tunnel into the Brazilian night knowing that this could be his last meaningful act for his country. Lose here and he's *surely* going to retire again. This time for good. He came back last time despite the "pain," determined to win something for his country. He won't come back again. As he approached the centre of the pitch, he rubbed his temple forlornly. What was on his mind? A man has rarely looked so lonely on a football pitch.

The platinum blonde Aguero made his way onto the pitch, too, replacing Man Utd's Pereyra.

It didn't take long, though - just two minutes - for Argentina to make a pig's ear of an easy pass. The storm of boos rang out. Then, Messi undercooked a pass and Almiron took advantage, bursting forward again with his electric pace. A minute later he had the insolence to *rob* Messi. He was beginning to dominate the game. Argentina had a lot to do in order to score a goal but they also had to deal with his constant threat. They also had the robust Santander to deal with.

On 51 minutes - out of nothing - Argentina hit the crossbar. Aguero used his strength to shrug off his marker, pulled the ball back and Martinez came within inches of equalising. The rebound fell to Messi, who swivelled and shot, only to see the keeper palm it out for a corner. It was all a bit of a desperate scramble but a reminder that they weren't done yet.

And then came VAR drama. Before the resulting corner was taken the referee went to the video screen to check for a possible penalty. He decided - after at least two minutes of scrutiny - that it was a penalty. The replay showed that Martinez's shot struck an arm and *then* hit the woodwork. The replay also suggested that a penalty was an incredibly harsh decision.

Up stepped Messi. He wiped his face, he rubbed his temple - he scored. He grabbed the ball, geed up the crowd and then made a heart gesture. Argentina - thanks to VAR - were back in business. They were lucky.

But their luck didn't last long. Less than five minutes later, Otamendi brought Gonzales down in the box and Paraguay were themselves awarded a penalty. Gonzales - sporting a nasty gash on his eyebrow - put the ball on the spot, the ref gave the keeper instructions about keeping both feet on his line - and the keeper saved it, diving to his left to push the ball out for a corner before putting his index finger to his mouth. He was silencing the critics.

It had been a breathless ten minutes and things were heating up. Messi was beginning to beat defenders at last. Argentina were winning corners. LoCelso put a ball into the box and Martinez headed over from four yards out.

Rojas for Paraguay went down in his own area for a few minutes. Was he really injured or was he trying to slow the game down? No bother for Argentina, they were about to ramp things up by bringing on Di Maria. Now, they had the Holy Trinity on the pitch for maximum damage: Messi, Aguero and Di Maria, who replaced Martinez. The Di Maria substitution did raise an interesting question, though: Would we ever see Dybala at this years Copa America?

The game began to drift. Aguero and Messi - both shackled by a gang of Paraguay players, including Almiron, who was dropping deep - struggled to link up. Di Maria couldn't get into the game and was guilty of misplaced passes. The way things were going, Paraguay were the happiest even though Argentina were controlling possession.

Into the last ten minutes and it was Almiron who brought life back into the dying game with a sparkling run. Once again, he burst forward, beat a man and was then hacked down by Otamendi. It proved to be Almiron's last contribution before he was substituted.

The substitution meant that Paraguay became more hemmed in. With three minutes to go, Argentina started to pile on the pressure. A point would have been *okay* but it would have put huge pressure on their final game v Qatar.

Seven minutes were added on. Paraguay - who had become increasingly stubborn - continued to sit deep. Di Maria battled with an impossible number of defenders who crowded him out. Messi mis-controlled a ball and got cluttered. Tagliafico - who got so far forward that he left his team vulnerable to a counter - had a shot blocked. If Argentina were to win this, it was going to take something out of the ordinary. Something that Messi usually produced for Barcelona.

94 minutes and Romero - a Paraguayan substitute who had looked very lively - went down and killed some time. Aguero then got flagged for offside near the halfway line and it looked like Argentina were done for the night. They hadn't lost but they hadn't won. Their fans won't accept that. It's hard to believe that Argentina - such a proud, legendary footballing nation who has given us Di Stefano, Maradona and Batistuta - are now facing do-or-die against *Qatar* of all teams.