

Copa America: Brazil win 2-0 as Lionel Messi fails again with Argentina

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Brazil beat Argentina 2-0 on Tuesday and will play Sunday's Copa America final at the Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro seeking its 10th South American title.

Thiago Silva, Arthur, Gabriel Jesus, Roberto Firmino and Dani Alves during Brazil's semifinal match against Argentina. (Source: Reuters)

Brazil without Neymar has proved to be better than Argentina with Lionel Messi.

In a performance that ended with "oléolé" chants from the crowd, Brazil beat Argentina 2-0 on Tuesday and will play Sunday's Copa America final at the Maracana Stadium in Rio de Janeiro seeking its 10th South American title.

Superstar Messi, meanwhile, remains without trophies for his national team despite showing his best performance in the tournament at the Mineirao Stadium in Belo Horizonte.

Gabriel Jesus opened the scoring at 19 minutes after a samba-style play from right-back Dani Alves. It was the striker's first goal in the tournament.

Roberto Firmino added the second at 71 minutes assisted by Jesus in front of 56,000 fans that sang chants on Messi's lack of trophies with Argentina and Diego Maradona's drug problems to celebrate.

Brazil's opponent will be determined on Wednesday when defending champions Chile take on underdogs Peru at the Arena do Gremio in Porto Alegre.

Wearing a flamboyant golden jacket, striker Neymar, who left the squad shortly before Copa America because of a right ankle injury, celebrated Brazil's victory with friends and with far-right President Jair Bolsonaro in the stadium's corporate boxes.

For the first time since Copa America began, Argentina repeated its starting lineup of the previous 2-0 win over Venezuela, keeping its up-front trio with Lionel Messi, Sergio Aguero and Lautaro Martinez. But the approach against Brazil was clearly different, with the team sitting back and preparing for counters.

Brazil had two changes to face its archrivals, with midfielder Casemiro returning from suspension in Allan's place and Alex Sandro substituting injured Filipe Luis in the left-back.

Still, Argentina still was first to get an opportunity to open the scoring. At 12 minutes, Leandro Paredes fired from long distance and the ball flew close to Alisson's bar.

That did not intimidate Brazil. On the first goal, Alves flicked the ball over Marcos Acuna, left Paredes behind and passed to Firmino on the right flank. With a low cross, he allowed Jesus to score only meters away from goalkeeper Franco Armani.

The visitors nearly leveled at 30 minutes, when Messi took a free kick and Aguero headed the ball onto the bar. Brazil's defense cleared and avoided conceding its first goal in five Copa America matches.

After the break Brazil took extra precautions by substituting winger Everton for midfielder Willian. But that did not stop Messi and Argentina.

At 57 minutes, Messi hit Alisson's right post from close range. He also got the rebound, crossed the ball into the penalty box, but no Argentinian was near enough to push it to the net.

To keep the pressure on the Brazilians, coach Lionel Scaloni substituted midfielder Acuna for winger Angel di Maria. But a counter at 71 minutes punished his audacity.

Jesus stole the ball in his half of the field and bulldozed through Argentina's left flank. Facing Armani, he gently assisted Firmino to score the final goal.

“They were more efficient, we had our chances and could not score,” said Argentina defender Nicolas Tagliafico. “We played well for some time, badly for some time.”

His coach disagrees: “By merit, the team that should have advanced to the final was Argentina,” Scaloni said.

The coach also complained about the refereeing in Firmino's goal, insisting his team had heard a whistle in the beginning of Jesus's move.

At the end of the match, Argentina's Paredes wept sitting on the pitch as Messi once again looked distraught.

The Brazilians celebrated with moderation after a match that could have had a different ending if Argentina had found the net instead of the posts on two occasions.

The match at the Mineirao was once again marked by homophobic chants of the Brazilian fans when Armani took his goal kicks.

- AP