

Messi leads Argentina past Cape Verde in 3-2 extra-time thriller

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Online Desk : Lionel Messi and defending champions Argentina survived a dramatic scare on Friday, edging Cape Verde 3-2 after extra time to secure a place in the FIFA World Cup Round of 16. Following the final whistle, Messi and his teammates showed visible relief after overcoming a spirited challenge from tournament debutants Cape Verde, who twice fought back to level the match before finally falling short.

Despite the defeat, Cape Verde's remarkable performance will be remembered as one of the tournament's biggest surprises. The small island nation off Africa's west coast pushed the reigning world champions to their limits in a memorable contest. Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni praised his opponents, saying the match proved there are no easy opponents at the World Cup.

International Sports Competitions Argentina regained the lead for good in the 111th minute when Cristian Romero's header deflected off Cape Verde defender Diney Borges and was recorded as an own goal. Messi had earlier opened the scoring with his record-extending 20th World Cup goal, while Lisandro Martinez gave Argentina a 2-1 advantage in stoppage time of normal play.

Cape Verde responded on both occasions through Sidny Lopes Cabral and Derooy Duarte. Cabral's stunning curling strike in the 103rd minute leveled the match at 2-2 and briefly raised hopes of a penalty shootout. However, Argentina held on after the decisive own goal and advanced to face Egypt, who defeated Australia in a penalty shootout earlier on Friday. The Round of 16 clash will take place Tuesday in Atlanta.

Messi praised his team's determination, saying Argentina continued competing until the very end and never stopped fighting for the victory. Cape Verde's Fairytale Journey Ends

Cape Verde's first-ever World Cup appearance exceeded all expectations. Backed by outstanding performances from 40-year-old goalkeeper Vozinha, the nation of just over 525,000 people became the smallest country ever to reach the tournament's knockout stage.

The Blue Sharks earned impressive draws against former champions Spain and Uruguay, as well as Saudi Arabia, before their courageous display against Argentina. Vozinha was outstanding once again, making 10 saves, including five against Messi, to keep his side in contention throughout the match. Head coach Bubi expressed pride in his players, saying they represented their country with dignity and demonstrated their identity by competing toe-to-toe with one of football's strongest teams.

Messi Continues Record-Breaking Form Messi opened the scoring in the 29th minute after timing his run perfectly to meet Lisandro Martinez's lofted pass before controlling the ball and finishing powerfully into the roof of the net.

The goal was Messi's seventh of the tournament, moving him one ahead of France's Kylian Mbappé in the race for the Golden Boot. It also extended his World Cup career scoring record, placing him two goals clear of Mbappé on the all-time list while stretching his scoring streak to eight consecutive World Cup matches, during which he has netted 12 goals. International Sports Competitions Earlier in the match, Messi narrowly missed the target with a low effort before seeing a free kick comfortably saved by Vozinha, who repeatedly frustrated Argentina's captain.

Pride Despite Defeat Cape Verde defender Pico Lopes admitted the result was disappointing but said the team could be proud of its resilience after twice coming from behind against the defending champions. Following the match, players and coach Bubi remained on the field for several minutes, many overcome

with emotion. Some sat quietly with heads bowed, while others embraced teammates before acknowledging their supporters. Reflecting on the tournament, Bubista said Cape Verde had shown that although it is a small nation, it is capable of competing with the world's best teams.