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SPORT

WORLD CUP

Messi not done yet after inspiring Argentina to final

‘These are special feelings. I think squad could feel it and this was a game Argentine people really wanted to win’

AFP
Atlanta

Lionel Messi has already won the World Cup, but the Argentina captain added another chapter to his astonishing career on Wednesday, inspiring his team to victory in their semi-final against England.

The defending champions were up against it, trailing to Anthony Gordon's goal until the 85th minute in Atlanta before Messi worked his magic.

This time the tournament's all-time leading marksman did not score. But he teed up Enzo Fernandez for the equaliser and delivered the cross for Lautaro Martinez to head in the winner, sealing a 2-1 victory.

“These are special feelings. I think the squad could feel it and this was a game the Argentine people really wanted to win, and so did we,” Messi, 39, said after facing England for the first time in his career.

“This is still a special fixture.”

He was not quite able to emulate Diego Maradona, who scored two iconic goals in Argentina's 1986 World Cup quarter-final win over England. But he will settle for the two assists, and he has already emulated his legendary predecessor by winning the trophy four years ago in Qatar.

Now, after Argentina maintained their incredible record of never having lost a World Cup semi-final, Messi will appear in a second straight final, and a third overall.

The South Americans are aiming to become the first team to retain the World Cup since Brazil in 1962, and Messi, the sole survivor from the side that lost to Germany in 2014, will become just the second player after Brazilian great Cafu to appear in three finals.

“It is crazy to be playing in back-to-back finals,” he said.

Argentina had already staged a stunning late comeback to beat Egypt 3-2 in the same Atlanta stadium in the last 16, and they smelled blood as England sat deeper and deeper after going ahead.

“Once again we managed to do the job when things were looking bad. We never stopped believing,” said Messi, who has now played a record 33 World Cup games across six different tournaments.



Argentina's forward Lionel Messi celebrates winning the World Cup semi-final against England in Atlanta. (AFP)

For long spells on Wednesday his influence was limited, but that has often been the way with Messi and he was still able to drag his team to victory.

“I felt like for large parts of the game, we dealt with him really well. But as always with the most dangerous players in the world, when they have the ball in the final third, they can create something,” said England captain Harry Kane.

“He's done that again today. He's obviously one of the best players ever for a reason.”

Messi is arguably the greatest of all, and there may no longer be an argument if Argentina successfully defend their title in Sunday's final against Spain.

Pele and Maradona only played in two

World Cup finals while Maradona won the trophy just once.

Messi is also the all-time top scorer in World Cup history with 21 goals, although Kylian Mbappe is just one behind and plays Saturday against England in the third-place play-off.

He could easily have bowed out of international football after 2022, when Argentina defeated France in the final.

But he appears to have been saving himself for this World Cup in recent years, removing himself from the intensity of European football and acclimatising to American conditions with Inter Miami.

While Cristiano Ronaldo's ongoing presence in the Portugal team may have

held them back, Messi remains almost as influential as ever.

“He is just the leader and key player in any team in which he plays,” said England coach Thomas Tuchel.

Now he gets his chance to play Spain in a competitive game for the first time, and the identity of the opposition makes the occasion even more special.

Messi moved to Barcelona with his family at the age of 13 and stayed for two decades, before leaving in 2021 for Paris Saint-Germain. He has a Spanish passport and may one day settle down again in Castelldefels, just down the coast from Barcelona.

But before Messi thinks about that, he wants to douse Spain's dreams.

ARGENTINA SMELT 'BLOOD IN WATER' IN ENGLAND WIN: SCALONI

Argentina coach **Lionel Scaloni** saluted his team's never-say-die mentality after another come-from-behind victory on Wednesday powered them past England into the World Cup final.

Scaloni said his team had scented victory as England sat back after taking a 1-0 lead in their semi-final in Atlanta and went for broke to secure a deserved 2-1 win.

“I think that this team plays the best when we are facing adversity,” Scaloni said. “We had a challenging game, a challenging situation. “There was blood in the water, and we went for it. That's the feeling that I was getting. “You just have to keep going. We hit the crossbar. We hit the post, and it just couldn't go in. There's six or seven chances, but I'm very pleased about that because the team fought to the very end, and I think this is critical.”

It was the second time in the knockout rounds that Argentina have won after trailing late in the game following their remarkable last-16 escape act against Egypt - a win Scaloni described at the time as “epic”. Asked how he would describe Wednesday's victory, Scaloni offered: “Epic, squared?”

Scaloni said the win, which sends Argentina into a final showdown against European champions Spain in New Jersey on Sunday, was a team effort.

“This group is difficult to explain. It is a show of the collectiveness, the brotherhood that we are in, the the fight to the very end that we have,” Scaloni said.

The Argentina coach, who now has the chance to lead the South Americans to four straight major titles after Copa America victories either side of the 2022 World Cup win, said his team had been unfazed as they sought to drag themselves back into the game. “I know the guys. They fear nothing,” he said. “They don't feel the weight on their shoulders.

“They're they're playing like they're seven or eight years old. They're not thinking about 'oh, what's going to happen if we miss or they're not thinking about the semifinal or final?’”

SPOTLIGHT

Master and apprentice as Spain, Argentina coaches meet in final

AFP
East Rutherford, United States

Master will take on apprentice when Spain coach Luis de la Fuente lines up against his former student, Argentina's Lionel Scaloni, in the World Cup final on Sunday.

Nine years ago, Scaloni was just another former professional player pursuing a career in coaching, studying for his pro license at the Spanish football federation's training center in Las Rozas, on the outskirts of Madrid.

His teacher on the course? De la Fuente. In the years since, both men have gone on to forge successful coaching careers in international football.

Scaloni, 48, took charge of Argentina in August 2018, initially on an interim basis - less than a year after taking coaching lessons in de la Fuente's classroom.

Since then the former Deportivo La Coruna player has led Argentina into a golden age of tournament success. He ended their 28-year wait for a major title with victory at the 2021 Copa America and then followed that up with the ultimate prize - the 2022 World Cup.

Another Copa America title was added in 2024.

Over a similar period, de la Fuente has overseen a resurgence in Spanish football fortunes that has left La Roja on course for a second World Cup win, to set alongside their triumph in 2010.

Appointed in December 2022 after Spain's insipid last-16 exit to Morocco at the last World Cup, de la Fuente, 65, has returned Spain to the top table of international football.

A thrilling victory at the 2024 European Championship was backed up

by a run to the final of the UEFA Nations League last year.

Tuesday's semi-final masterclass against France has left de la Fuente on the brink of topping those successes

Spain coach Luis de la Fuente lines up against his former student and now Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni in the final on Sunday



with a World Cup win. Both Scaloni and de la Fuente have spoken warmly of each other on their journeys to Sunday's final showdown at the MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

“He was my mentor, and he taught me everything I know and now we are facing each other in a final,” Scaloni said of de la Fuente following Wednesday's epic 2-1 semi-final defeat of England.

“I remember after Qatar when we had a conference among coaches, and I had a chat with him

for quite a while. He's done brilliant work with his team, I'm very pleased for him.”

Scaloni has strong personal and professional ties to Spain after spending the bulk of his playing career there. His wife, Elisa Montero, is Spanish, and the couple live with their two sons in Mallorca.

On Sunday, though, despite his warm relationship with de la Fuente, Scaloni has no doubt where his loyalties lie. “Of course everyone knows I live in Spain and have Spanish family. I'm very, very sorry, but I'm going to try to beat Mr de la Fuente. He's gained my absolute respect, of course, not just because of the way that he plays on the pitch and manages, but also as a person.”

De la Fuente has reciprocated, describing Scaloni as a model student. “I have great respect for Lionel,” he said. “He has won everything with the Argentina national team. I agree with many of his ideas, I admire him professionally and personally. He is a great person. Lionel was a very diligent student, with a great attitude and interest. He had the touch of someone who is determined to grow. Being his teacher is an honor.

“But above all, I feel that way because I am his friend. We continue to have a great relationship and a great mutual admiration.”

TOUR DE FRANCE

Merlier secures stage 12 despite late crash

Reuters
CHALON-SUR-SAONE, France

Belgian Tim Merlier underlined his status as the Tour de France's dominant sprinter by winning Stage 12 on Thursday, his third victory of this year's race after a dramatic finale to the 179.1-km ride from Nevers to Chalon-sur-Saone.

The Soudal-Quick Step rider, who missed out on victory in Nevers on Wednesday, stayed clear of a major crash about 400 metres from the finish that brought down Colombian Fernando Gaviria and several other riders.

He surged through to beat Dutchman Olav Kooij of Decathlon CMA CGM and fellow Belgian Jasper Philipsen of Alpecin-Premier Tech.

"I think my radio was broken and I didn't know about the late attack before the climb with 20 riders," Merlier said.

"Jasper Stuyven got a flat tire but we stayed calm and I was on a good day. Today I was really focused on the guys who were boxed in yesterday. I found some space and I launched. It was the kind of finish that suited me."

The victory added to Merlier's earlier stage wins in Bordeaux and Bergerac and was the 33-year-old's sixth career Tour de France stage triumph.

Slovenian Tadej Pogacar of UAE Team Emirates-XRG safely retained the yellow jersey, maintaining an overall lead of more than three-and-a-half minutes over two-time Tour winner Jonas Vingegaard.

Earlier, Baptiste Vestroffer launched a solo breakaway after around 25km and was later joined by three riders, but the move was gradually reeled in by the peloton.

A subsequent attack by a group of 14 riders inside the final 35km also failed to gain decisive ground, with the bunch bringing them back

with 24km remaining before the stage built towards an expected sprint finish.

GREEN JERSEY BATTLE TIGHTENS

There was no change at the top of the general classification, but the fight for the green jersey became even tighter after Stage 12.

Points leader Mads Pedersen strengthened his tally at the intermediate sprint, yet lost ground to his closest rivals at the finish as stage winner Tim Merlier and third-placed Jasper Philipsen continued to close the gap.

Pedersen leads the standings on 357 points, ahead of Biniam Girmay (317), Philipsen (311) and Merlier (307).

With four riders separated by 50 points and plenty of sprint opportunities still to come, the race for the points classification looks set to go down to the final stage in Paris scheduled to take place on July 26.



Soudal Quick-Step team's Belgian rider Tim Merlier celebrates at the finish line to win the 12th stage of the Tour de France cycling race yesterday. (Reuters)

CRICKET

Root stranded on 99 as England level ODI series

ENGLAND BEAT INDIA BY FOUR WICKETS IN CARDIFF

AFP
Cardiff, United Kingdom

Joe Root's typically composed 99 not out steered jittery England to a four-wicket win over India in the second one-day international in Cardiff yesterday that levelled this three-match series at 1-1.

Root walked out to bat with England 0-1 after Ben Duckett was caught behind off Jasprit Bumrah from the first ball of the innings.

England were 8-2 when Jacob Bethell nicked a rising delivery from Prasidh Krishna to wicket-keeper Ishan Kishan, a replacement for the ill KL Rahul, before skipper Harry Brook fell to a skitish scoop.

Root, not for the first time in his long career, led an England revival as they chased down a modest target of 234 with 35 balls remaining to turn Sunday's finale at Lord's into a series decider.

The former England captain faced 133 balls, including nine fours, and was only denied what would have been his 21st ODI century when the recalled Gus Atkinson, riding his luck with a few streaky shots, pulled Prasidh Krishna for four.

When Sam Curran (22) was excellently taken standing up to the stumps by Kishan - the stand-in's fourth catch - off Shivam Dube, England were faltering at 94-4.

But Root completed a 76-ball fifty - his second half-century in three days following his 76 not out in a six-wicket India win in Tuesday's series opener at Edgbaston. Fellow veteran Jos Buttler fell for just 17, clean bowled trying to drive left-arm spinner Axar Patel. Root needed a reliable ally and it seemed he had found one in Will Jacks.

But having made 30, Jacks inexplicably backed away to leg and



England's Joe Root plays a shot during the second one-day international against India at Sophia Gardens in Cardiff, Wales, yesterday. (AFP)

slapped paceman Gurnoor Brar straight to extra cover. Root threw his head back in anguish as India gained renewed hope with England 197-6 off 40 overs.

Earlier, Jofra Archer led a much-improved England bowling display as India were dismissed for 233. India looked set for a score in excess of 300 when Virat Kohli (65) and Shreyas Iyer (66) were at the crease together.

But a revamped England attack used the short ball to good effect to seize back the initiative at a sun-drenched Sophia Gardens.

India, who had been 178-3, lost their last seven wickets for 55 runs - including a mini collapse of 4-15 - as they were all

out with six overs remaining. Fast bowler Archer took 3-47 from his 10 overs after Brook won the toss, with Atkinson and Saqib Mahmood recalled to bolster England's seam-bowling options.

India captain Shubman Gill, fresh from his 80 at Edgbaston, fell for 31 when he drove Atkinson to cover. Kohli has already retired from Test and T20 international cricket and this series could be the last time the legendary 37-year-old represents India in Britain.

He showed his class by straight-driving Curran for four to bring up a run-a-ball fifty as chants of "Kohli, Kohli, Kohli" echoed round the ground. Iyer was dropped on 25 and soon af-

terwards, he drove leg-spinner Adil Rashid for a soaring straight six. England dismissed Kohli when a top edge off Archer flew to Rashid at third man.

Archer struck with successive deliveries to reduce India to 193-7.

Patel was caught behind off a attempted ramp and Dube drove a fuller-length delivery straight back to Archer. Iyer's casual hook for six off Archer saw him to a 42-ball fifty. But he fell tamely, caught behind off Atkinson, who finished with 3-50.

BRIEF SCORES: England 235 for 6 (Root 99*, Gurnoor 2-67) beat India 233 (Iyer 66, Kohli 65, Archer 3-47) by four wickets.

ATHLETICS

Attention to detail as Britain's Kerr targets El Guerrouj's mile record

AFP
London

Josh Kerr is hoping hitting peak physical form blends with minute planning and the latest in running shoe innovation to help propel him to a world record in the men's mile.

Kerr has chosen tomorrow's Diamond League meet in London to have a tilt at the 3min 43.13sec set by Morocco's Hicham El Guerrouj in Rome back in 1999.

The 28-year-old US-based Scot, 2023 world 1,500m champion and Olympic silver medallist, currently holds the British record over the mile with 3:45.34, set in Eugene in 2024.

"It is the most historic track record, but the current mark... has not been bettered this century," Kerr said in a series of all-encompassing articles for British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* laying bare his approach to the race.

"It's too long. It's time to bring this record into the modern era through training, technology and effort.

"I have won three world titles and two Olympic medals but joining Sir Roger (Bannister), as well as middle-distance legends Steve Ovett, Sebastian Coe and Steve Cram on the roll call of mile record holders, would be the biggest moment of my career."

Kerr's bid to break the 27-year-old record is built on a combination of factors, not least shoe technology.

The required pace to break the record involves an athlete running an average of 16.2 mph or 55.5sec laps.

Kerr, known as being highly selective in the races he runs, wears Brooks running shoes, and the Scot contends the latest pair he'll be donning, after months in the design lab, "will change athletics".

"Night and day. The biggest leap in innovation that I have experienced in athletics. Years ahead," were Kerr's reactions to wearing the new shoes.

"I was like a child again on Christmas morning. It has been very special to see this vision come to life."

Kerr said the newly custom-designed shoes, with a stiff but lightweight carbon fibre plate

embedded in the sole, were "ultra aggressive" and offered up a rocker effect, with no cushioning beneath the heel.

"This sort of design suits the demands of a mile world record, where changes of pace should be less dramatic than a championship race and it is more about constantly holding an all-out record speed."

Kerr, coached by Danny Mackey, currently lives at high altitude in Albuquerque, New Mexico, but has also converted his bedroom into an altitude chamber to better benefit from the natural production of more oxygen-rich red blood cells.

That setup, however, does not make for later evenings.

"After dinner, at about 7.45pm, my wife Larimar and I will go in. We can watch a film but we're usually asleep by 8.30pm," said the two-time world indoor 3,000m champion.

Devotion to the sport has seen Kerr miss out on life with extended family in the United Kingdom, while he has surrounded himself with a dedicated backroom staff including physiotherapists, mental coaches and even a "performance chef".

Kerr's defence of his 1,500m title at last year's world championships in Tokyo did not go to plan as he strained his calf in the semi-final - something for which he blames himself.

"Tokyo happened for a reason and it has only left me mentally stronger than ever for this world-record attempt," he said.

Kerr will line up in a strong field tomorrow including American Yared Nuguse, whose North American mile record of 3:43.97 guarantees a dramatic race in the British capital.

Meanwhile world athletics announced that former British national coach Tom McNab has died at the age of 92.

Born in Glasgow in December 1933, McNab trained as a physical education teacher. He competed in the triple jump and won five Scottish titles, but he went on to make a far greater impact on the sport through coaching, development and writing.

McNab played a significant role in reshaping the domestic structure of the sport.



IOC defends Russian reinstatement after EU countries call for funding cuts

LAUSANNE: The International Olympic Committee (IOC) defended its decision to provisionally lift the suspension of the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) after nine European Union member states called on Brussels to stop funding sports bodies that have re-admitted Russian and Belarusian athletes. In a letter to European sports commissioner Glenn Micallef, the countries urged the European Union to stop funding sporting bodies, including the IOC, World Aquatics and the International Fencing Federation, that had allowed Russian and Belarusian athletes back into competition. The nine countries are Estonia,

Denmark, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and Sweden. An IOC spokesperson told Reuters that the ROC's suspension, which had been in place since October 2023, was lifted earlier this month after the organisation removed regional sports bodies from occupied Ukrainian territories from its membership, the reason it was originally sanctioned. The IOC said the decision was provisional and did not signal a broader change in its position towards Russia. "The IOC has to navigate the complex realities and consequences of the current geopolitical

context," the IOC spokesperson said yesterday. "The IOC must uphold its mission to preserve a values-based and truly global sporting platform that provides hope to the world." The spokesperson added that the IOC would continue not to hold events in Russia or invite Russian government officials to its events. No decision has been taken on the use of Russian flags, colours or the national anthem at future Olympics. The IOC also noted that competitions outside the Olympics fall under the authority of the relevant international federations. The Olympic body said it had also strengthened the Olympic

Charter, requiring National Olympic Committees to ensure athletes selected for the Games are chosen not only on sporting merit but also on their ability to act as role models who promote a peaceful society through sport. The nine EU countries said allowing Russian and Belarusian athletes to return to international competition overlooked the difficulties faced by Ukrainian athletes, many of whom have been displaced, lost access to training facilities or joined the military. "Respect for human rights, the rule of law, and peaceful relations between nations are among the core principles underpinning international sport," the countries wrote.

FOCUS

Tuchel defends tactics after England dream dies

‘WE’RE DISAPPOINTED, WE WERE SO CLOSE BUT WE GOT TOO PASSIVE AFTER WE SCORED’



AFP
Atlanta

England manager Thomas Tuchel defended his tactics after the Three Lions’ World Cup dream ended in an agonising late defeat to Argentina on Wednesday.

England appeared poised to reach their first World Cup final since 1966 after Anthony Gordon fired them into the lead early in the second half in Atlanta.

But England then invited wave after wave of late pressure from the defending champions and goals from Enzo Fernandez and Lautaro Martinez secured a famous 2-1 victory. Tuchel said his team had become “too passive” after taking the lead at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

“We’re disappointed, we were so close but we got too passive after we scored and conceded a lot of chances,” Tuchel told the BBC.

“We could not turn the ball possession around and then conceded so many crosses, chances and shots,” the German coach added.

“We were close but couldn’t keep the level up after we scored.”

Tuchel is likely to face serious scrutiny for his substitutions, notably the decision to bring goalscorer Gordon off for defender Ezri Konsa in the 72nd minute.

“I did also offensive substitutions in the last games, we just tried to help the players,” he said.

“We conceded a chance straight

England manager Thomas Tuchel reacts during the World Cup semi-final against Argentina at Atlanta Stadium in Atlanta, Georgia, on Wednesday. (AFP)



Anthony Gordon (second left) of England celebrates scoring his team's first goal during the World Cup semi-final against Argentina at Atlanta Stadium in Atlanta, Georgia. (AFP)

away and we decided to go to a back five because the gaps were far too open. Straight after our goal, without any substitutions, we conceded way too many crosses and way too many chances so we tried to help.”

Asked later at a press conference whether he believed he got his tactics wrong, former Chelsea and Paris Saint-Germain coach Tuchel replied: “No, I believe that’s just the nature of the game.

“As soon as you lose, you get criticized. It’s just what it is. No one knows what would have happened if we made different decisions. So it makes no sense to engage in that and lose my head. I’m responsible for them. I took them, so I take the criticism.”

Asked why England had shied away from a more adventurous approach when leading, Tuchel replied: “Yes, but it doesn’t help if you can’t get the ball. We couldn’t get out. Of course we wanted to go for the second goal but I did not have the feeling that offensive substitutions would help.

“We couldn’t win any balls, we couldn’t keep the ball so I think it was not a structural problem, we changed nothing. But the match changed completely.”

Tuchel signed a two-year contract extension in February which lasts through to the 2028 European Championships which England is co-hosting. Asked if he expected to remain England manager after Wednesday’s defeat, the German indicated he plans to honour his contract that leads up the the 2028 European Championship.

“We keep on going for contract until the home Euros, and I’m looking forward to that. Even like now, it’s difficult to look that far ahead,” he said.

Tuchel is understood to retain the backing of the Football Association, who appointed him in October 2024. “It is heartbreaking to be so close,” said FA chief executive Mark Bullingham. “The players and Thomas gave it everything today and the squad, coaches and staff could not have worked harder during the tournament.”

‘Lost his Tuch?’ - England boss hammered by media

Thomas Tuchel may have criticised his England stars for being too “passive” in their World Cup semi-final defeat against Argentina, but it is the beleaguered German who has come under fire from the British media for his defensive tactics.

Hampered by Tuchel’s cautious substitutions, England squandered a golden opportunity to reach their first World Cup final since 1966, blowing the lead as Argentina scored twice in the closing minutes to snatch a 2-1 win on Wednesday.

British tabloid *The Sun* encapsulated the mood of recrimination among frustrated England fans as their headlines blared: ‘Lost his Tuch?’ and ‘Thomas tanked it’.

Tuchel was lambasted for sending on Dan Burn and Ezri Konsa to make a five-man defence, in a failed bid to hold on after England went 1-0 up through Anthony Gordon’s goal early in the second half in Atlanta.

There was a feeling of *deja vu* for England supporters, who had watched their team let one-goal leads slip away against Croatia in the 2018 World Cup semi-final and Italy in the Covid-delayed Euro 2020 final.

The *Daily Mail* slammed Tuchel, saying despite being brought in to solve the tactical issues caused by predecessor Gareth Southgate, the German had also been too negative when the stakes were highest.

“Thomas Tuchel’s changes cost England against Argentina - they were out of ideas and doomed to lose from that moment. It was a return to the bad habits Gareth Southgate was criticised for”,

said the *Mail*. *The Times*’ columnist Martin Samuel said Tuchel had been just as conservative as many other failed former England managers.

“The England head coach was supposed to cure the team’s fear but managers are pragmatists,” he wrote.

“Anyone who doesn’t jump is an Englishman, the Argentinians sing. And anyone who knows how to hold a lead in a World Cup semi-final is definitely not.

“The disease remains and is as contagious as ever. Different group, fancy new boss, same dispiriting outcome.”

Tuchel’s own words were turned against him, after he claimed that England had been scared to express themselves during the Euro 2024 final defeat against Spain in Southgate’s last match in charge.

“They were afraid to drop out of the tournament, in my observation, than having the excitement and hunger to win it,” he (Tuchel) said (in March) - Not as easy as it looks, this international management lark,” Samuel wrote.

However, with the 52-year-old former Chelsea and Paris Saint-Germain coach under contract until Euro 2028, the British media said Tuchel is likely to avoid the sack.

‘Thomas Tuchel to STAY as England boss despite ‘cowardly’ defeat read the headline in another tabloid the *Mirror*, citing the word used by Spain’s 2010 World Cup winning goalkeeper Iker Casillas to describe the strategy deployed by the coach.

“They (England) score the goal and drop back. A cowardly approach,” Casillas posted on X.

REACTION

Kane ‘gutted’ after England crash out

AFP
Atlanta

Harry Kane said he was “gutted” for England and their fans after his team were beaten 2-1 by defending champions Argentina in the World Cup semi-finals on Wednesday.

Anthony Gordon’s strike had put the Three Lions on the cusp of a first men’s World Cup final since they lifted the 1966 trophy but Lionel Messi inspired a dramatic turnaround in Atlanta.

He set up Enzo Fernandez, who blasted home from outside the area, and provided an inch-perfect cross for Lautaro Martinez’s winner in stoppage time.

“Gutted for the boys, gutted for everyone -- the team, the staff, the fans,” England captain Kane told the BBC.

“We played a good game, the large majority of it. When we went 1-0 up we seemed to try and hold on, which at this level is not enough.

“So, just gutted because we’ve worked so hard to be here and the lads have given every last bit of running, blood, sweat, tears.”

Bayern Munich forward Kane, who scored six goals during the tournament, said Thomas Tuchel’s men had struggled to repel constant attacks from the de-



England’s forward Harry Kane reacts after losing the World Cup semi-final against Argentina at the Atlanta Stadium in Atlanta on Wednesday. (AFP)

fending champions.

“After the goal, whether it was them putting more men forward or us not being able to match them man for man, it was just wave after wave,” he said.

“Lads were putting blocks in but, in the end, it just wasn’t enough.”

He said England had not planned to rely on defending after Gordon’s goal.

“When we went ahead the messaging was to go again and get another goal,” he added.

“Then once they scored their two goals it was to try and find something but we couldn’t quite

get the momentum back in the game.”

England have now reached at least the semi-final stage in four of the past five major tournaments, but have still not won a major tournament since the 1966 World Cup.

Kane turns 33 later this month and refused to be drawn on whether he imagines still being part of the team by the time the next World Cup comes around.

He may be inspired by the performances of Lionel Messi, 39, who has scored eight goals at the 2026 tournament.

“As a person, it’s always just

SPOTLIGHT

Argentina semi hero Martinez ‘dreamt’ of scoring winner

AFP
Atlanta

Argentina’s World Cup semi-final match-winner Lautaro Martinez said he had “dreamt” of scoring the goal which took his team through to the final at England’s expense on Wednesday.

“I dreamt it. I told Alexis (Mac Allister) that I was going to score,” Martinez said after his heroics off the bench in Atlanta as the reigning champions won the game 2-1.

“And I said on the bench to Facundo Medina that I was going to come on and score.”

The World Cup holders were trailing 1-0 at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium when the Inter Milan striker was sent on in the 81st minute in place of left-back Nicolas Tagliafico.

Lionel Messi set up Enzo Fernandez to equalise in the 85th minute and the Argentina captain then crossed for Martinez to head in the winner in the second minute of injury time.

“When my old man first bought me a pair of boots, I always dreamed of scoring this goal,” said an emotional Martinez.

When he spoke again to reporters after leaving the dressing room, Martinez said he had just got off the phone to his mother, who was at work.

The 28-year-old Martinez lost his place in Lionel Scaloni’s Argentina team early on their run to glory at the 2022 World Cup.

He started all three group games this time, scoring in the 3-1 win over Jordan, but was substituted in the narrow victory over Cape Verde in the last 32 and has not started since.

Nevertheless, he came on to score in the 3-1 extra-time defeat of Switzerland in the quarter-finals before his decisive role against England.

Argentina will now take on Spain in Sunday’s final in New Jersey.



Argentina’s Lautaro Martinez during training at Atlanta United Training Centre in Marietta, Georgia, yesterday (Reuters)

“We are going to be coming up against a top-class side who have not lost in 38 games and have great players,” said Martinez.

“Now we need to get some rest but also enjoy this because what we are doing is not easy, getting back to the final as defending champions three and a half years after winning it.”

Spain’s last defeat was a 1-0 reverse in a friendly against Colombia in March 2024.

The teams were due to meet

in Qatar in March in the Finalissima, the fixture recently introduced to pit the European champions against the winners of the Copa America.

That game was postponed due to the war in the Middle East, triggered by US-Israeli strikes against Iran.

The only previous World Cup meeting of Spain and Argentina came in 1966, when the South Americans won 2-1 in a group-stage contest played at Birmingham’s Villa Park.

Rosenior ready for Paris challenge after ‘learning lessons’ at Chelsea

Former Chelsea coach Liam Rosenior said Thursday he hoped his short stint in charge at Stamford Bridge would help him make a success of the “exciting project” he has undertaken at Ligue 1 club Paris FC.

Rosenior, 42, took over at Chelsea in January but oversaw just 23 matches before being sacked in April by the Premier League giants.

“We joined the club in the middle of a season and a difficult moment, and I have many lessons I’ve learned,” Rosenior told reporters at his first press conference since being named PFC boss.

“There are things that I definitely could have done better and things I could have taken accountability for but there are also good things in what we did as well.”

However, the Englishman said he bore no ill will to Chelsea, nor to his successor, Xabi Alonso.

“I wish them all the best in the future. I think they have a fantastic manager, Xabi Alonso, now, and I will look out for their results,” he said.

“But those lessons that I take away from Chelsea, we will put into this job and hopefully we’ll help this club be a very, very big club in world football as well.”

Prior to taking over at BlueCo flagship club Chelsea, Rosenior made his name at another of the consortium’s entities, French top-flight side Strasbourg.

“(Ligue 1 is) a fantastic league. I said that when I left for Chelsea. I feel like myself and the staff have joined such an exciting project, where the potential is so big,” he said.

“It was something I couldn’t say no to.”

PFC, owned by the LVMH luxury group, finished 11th in Ligue 1 last season.