

Long Way To Go

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Argentina's hopes of winning this year's World Cup were cut short, if not destroyed entirely, by their tumultuous and disastrous qualifying campaign. Messi's last ditch hattrick against Ecuador secured them a place in Russia but it has seemingly papered over the insufficient preparation time Jorge Sampaoli had to begin working with.

Injuries to first team players like Romero, Lanzini, and Éver Banega didn't help their case in the build up to the World Cup. A draw against Iceland certainly doesn't help. No one expects anything from Argentina anymore and anything that they might achieve would be nothing short of miraculous.

Iceland was always going to be a difficult game. They aren't a pushover team. Not to forget, the bigger countries don't really play to their true potential in the opening game of the World Cup. After their heroics versus England in the EURO 2016, Iceland earned a reputation for playing extremely defensive with a parked bus with every player behind the ball and relying on sheer motivation and will to get through. That's exactly what they did against Argentina. The Icelandic players were starting Iceland's first ever game in a World Cup and emotions were obviously running high.

Parking the bus, despite being a tactic considered "anti-football", is the way to get the best out of Iceland's players considering how tall, physical, and persistent they are – these factors essentially made winning headers and second balls impossible for Argentina against a very direct, route one football side. In order to win against teams that sit back, you need players with the X-factor, who can pull something out of nothing and change the game within a few seconds. For Brazil, that's Neymar, Coutinho, and Marcelo. For Germany, that's Özil and Reus. France have Pogba, Dembélé, and Mbappé, while Spain have Isco, Iniesta, and Costa.

Argentina have Messi, who, despite being man-marked by two players at all times, managed to circulate possession and create chance upon chance in his very suffocated #10 role. The basics were done correctly and he was the team's best player that day, but he wasn't at his best clinically speaking. A missed penalty is

evident of that and will be the thing that dominates everyone's memory for the weeks to come. For the team referred to as Messi's team more often than not, where all the creative and scoring burden is on Messi himself, maybe it'll be a good idea to put someone else – preferably Agüero – on penalty duty. A decision like that would help the team as a collective.

However, aside from the what-could-have-beens there were some positives as well. Argentina's qualifying campaign involved 3 managers over the course of 18 games. After internal disputes and association-level mismanagement, the AFA took steps in the right direction by bringing in Tapas as the President and Jorge Sampaoli as the manager. Sampaoli's changes and improvements are very clear to see with the shift made towards a more possession and circulation based style as seen in his 2015 Copa America winning Chile team and with Sevilla in the 2017 as they finished 4th just behind Atlético Madrid. This team kept the ball nicely, combined and moved quickly, and circulated possession effectively. It's why they managed 20+ shots against Iceland's deep block. However, they were quite static in movement in the final third – something that's very uncharacteristic of a Sampaoli team. That's something that looks like it'll be fixed in their next match against Croatia because it's been leaked that Sampaoli will be playing a 3-back formation, apparently going more attacking versus a team that won't sit back and will look to attack constantly as well.

A lot of people were skeptical of some players selected but they've shown some encouraging signs – especially the younger players Meza and Pavón. They were a constant threat out wide and whilst moving in, had great link-up chemistry with Messi to initiate movement and create space. Sampaoli needs to keep playing them because there's a lot of potential to improve and become essential cogs to the team. Messi plays in the line behind the midfield and in front of the defense and because the defense and midfield were basically one line for Iceland, Messi was playing in the same space as Agüero but surrounded by 2 midfielders as man-markers which reduced his threat to an extent. The real chemistry with Messi can only be judged when Meza and Pavón play against a team that leaves space for them to operate in. In other words, Croatia and Nigeria.

Banega was the biggest takeaway from the game. He changed the game as soon as he came on and took initiative in carrying the ball forward, the only player aside from Messi to do so. He just has to start every game that Argentina have left to play.

Another thing quite evident from the match was that a midfield two of Mascherano and Biglia isn't the way to go because it creates redundancy as both of them are the same profile of player and have the same job to carry out. Mascherano has to stay in the starting-11 because he's the better player and Biglia needs to be out for Lo Celso to be in. A Mascherano-Biglia pivot just slows down every Argentine build up and invites press, something that can't be experimented with against more energetic and protagonistic sides. Lo Celso is a much more dynamic carrier and can operate alongside Messi as Argentina like going 4141 when moving forward.

However, Mascherano does need to work on those fouls as he gives away too many cheap free-kicks when the other team has the ball and Salvio needs to learn some positional discipline as he did his best impression of Joshua Kimmich by venturing so far forward and not tracking back at the right time, leaving vast pockets of space behind him for Iceland to play the ball into. Willy Caballero looks unsure of himself and uncertain what to do whenever he has to initiate build up; maybe it's time to see what Franco Armani could offer?

Changes will be made of course, varying from opposition to opposition, as Sampaoli doesn't have a fixed formation or team but the lack of time to prepare this team for the World Cup is still quite evident. They get the fundamentals right and sometimes that helps you win games, but this Argentina is not the team it should be and while having a Messi on your team always gives you a chance to do the unthinkable, they are not on the level of contenders like Spain and Brazil and have a long, long way to go.