

# Spain Edge Belgium, Face France

Super sub Mikel Merino broke Belgian hearts and sent Spain through to a World Cup semi-final against France with a late goal in a gripping 2-1 win on Friday.

The stunning finish at SoFi Stadium sets up a tantalizing showdown between European champions Spain and the tournament favorites France, featuring the red-hot Kylian Mbappe in Dallas on Tuesday.

But it was heartbreak for Belgium's substitute goalkeeper Senne Lammens, sent on late, who spilled a shot into the path of Merino.

The dramatic finale came after Fabian Ruiz opened the scoring for Spain, before Charles De Ketelaere grabbed one back for Belgium against the run of play before halftime.

Welcoming Kevin De Bruyne and Jeremy Doku back to the starting XI, Belgium were rocked by a hamstring injury during warm-ups to captain Youri Tielemans, which hit them hard.

Having already lost Amadou Onana to a ruptured ACL, the Red Devils had to play a near second-choice midfield against the Spanish possession masters.

Ruiz, brought in for Pedri, wasted no time combining with Rodri to dominate the ball and Barcelona's teen sensation Lamine Yamal curled an early shot just wide of the far post.

But opposing winger Doku was bright for Belgium, cutting in from the left to feed De Ketelaere, the striker fresh from his brace against the United States on Monday.



Spain's midfielder #06 Mikel Merino celebrates scoring his team's second goal during the match

Still, it was Spain who struck first. On the half-hour mark, Pedro Porro played a sharp one-two with Lamine Yamal before expertly cutting it back from near the byline to Dani Olmo.

Olmo's shot was parried by Thibaut Courtois, but fell to Ruiz, who fired it home.

Suddenly it was all Spain. They pinged passes around the Belgian half as though this World Cup quarter-final was a training exercise, laid on for an A-list crowd featuring Brad Pitt, Penelope Cruz and Noel Gallagher.

But Belgium, having fought back astonishingly late from 2-0 down in the round-of-32 to dispatch Senegal, did not panic.

They grabbed one back in the 41st minute. De Bruyne slid a through ball wide to Timothy Castagne. His cross found De Ketelaere, who perfectly timed his run and outmuscled Barcelona youngster Pau Cubarsi to head home.

It was the first goal Spain had conceded this World Cup.

Improbably, Belgium almost grabbed another before halftime. Breaking from a Spain corner, De Ketelaere's pass to a totally clear Doku was barely intercepted by Olmo.

Yamal grew into the game after the break, nearly finding Mikel Oyarzabal with an incisive cross that a charging Courtois well blocked.

Belgian coach Rudi Garcia brought on veteran striker Romelu Lukaku, who had scored from the bench in three straight games.

The game opened up. A Belgian cross hit Rodri's arm but the impact was deemed accidental. Oyarzabal had a shot saved from a close, tight angle.

A tearful Courtois was forced off by injury after 70 minutes. He was replaced by Lammens, the 24-year-old Manchester United 'keeper making his

World Cup debut in daunting circumstances.

It turned out to be a nightmare.

In the 88th minute, Cubarsi shot low from range, and Lammens should have held onto the ball. Instead substitute Mikel Merino was first to the rebound, smashing it home.

It was the Arsenal midfielder's second straight late winner from the bench, after he scored the crucial goal against Portugal in stoppage time on Monday.

Late on Alexis Saelemaekers rounded Unai, but was unable to find Lukaku in front of an open goal.

As the whistle blew, Courtois came out to embrace a distraught Lammens, while other members of Belgium's ageing "Golden Generation" stood immobile and disbelieving.

For Spain there were embraces and fist pumps before attention quickly turned to their blockbuster clash with France.

## Merlier wins Tour de France seventh stage in sprint finish



Soudal Quick-Step team's Belgian rider Tim Merlier cycles to the finish line

AFP | Bordeaux

Belgian Tim Merlier won the Tour de France seventh stage in a sprint finish at the end of a 175km run from Hagetmau to Bordeaux yesterday.

Norwegian Soren Waerenskjold took second place with Eritrean Biniam Girmay third as reigning champion Tadej Pogacar held onto the race leader's yellow jersey.

In a relatively uneventful day in southwest France, where the temperatures reached a maximum of 38C in Bordeaux, Merlier timed his effort to perfection, reeling in compatriot Jasper Philipsen and Girmay to secure a clear victory.

Philipsen's Alpecin-Premier Tech team had seem to set up the 10-time Tour stage winner perfectly for his dash to the line but he simply did not have the straight line speed to hold off Merlier.

Philipsen was fifth behind German Max Kanter in fourth, while Dane Mads Pedersen retained his lead in the sprinters'

green jersey points competition after finishing eighth.

It was another day with a breakaway doomed from the start, and few riders showing an interest in being a part of it.

Frenchman Baptiste Veistoffer escaped from the chequered flag for the second time in three days.

But having ridden 144km alone on Wednesday, this time he had Czech Jakub Otruba for company.

The sprinters' teams were not prepared to take any risks and never let the duo get more than a minute and a half up the road.

They were caught with 18km left after 156km out in front - meaning that Veistoffer had spent 300km in breakaways over the last three days.

Uno-X Mobility, whose rider Torstein Traeen had worn the yellow jersey for two days before a crash on Thursday forced him out of the race, repeatedly launched attacks to try to escape off the front of the peloton, but to no avail.

The stage was set for a sprinter's dash to the line.

## Can ageless Messi keep delivering for Argentina at World Cup?

### ● Messi scores in all World Cup matches

AFP | Kansas City

Lionel Messi has scored in every World Cup match so far, but after two gruelling knockout ties, will age finally catch up with the 39-year-old in the quarter-final against Switzerland?

Lionel Scaloni's team sailed through the group stage but have been pushed to the limit by Cape Verde and Egypt.

They needed extra time to squeeze past the World Cup newcomers in the last 32 before winning 3-2 and then came back from the dead against Mohamed Salah's team.

The defending champions have won all five of their games, with Messi's brilliance and their unshakeable team spirit central to their progress.

Messi made up for a missed penalty against Egypt with a wonderfully composed finish as Argentina rallied from two goals down in the closing minutes.

He broke down in a rare show of emotion at the end of the pulsating 3-2 win in Atlanta, saying he was desperate for his World Cup journey to continue.

"It was a moment of pure happiness and relief," said the Inter Milan forward. "We wanted to stay in the tournament. We didn't want today to be the end, we didn't want to go home."

Messi admitted he was tired after playing 120 minutes against Cape Verde but he featured for the whole game against Egypt and remains indispensable.

Saturday's quarter-final at Arrowhead Stadium will take him back to



Lionel Messi

the scene of his hat-trick in Argentina's first match of the 2026 tournament.

He has continued his scoring run, taking his tally to eight -- level with Golden Boot rival Kylian Mbappe.

And he has also become the leading scorer in World Cup history, with 21 goals across his career.

### Team spirit

Aside from their diminutive genius, Argentina's most potent weapon is their remarkable camaraderie.

The South Americans are now unbeaten in 11 World Cup games as they seek to become the first country since Brazil in 1962 to win back-to-back World Cups.

"Whatever happens from here on, this team gives me the feeling that it never stops believing, even when everything is going against it," said Scaloni.

That sentiment is echoed by midfielder Enzo Fernandez, who said the side "never gives up no matter the difficulties and adversity".

There have even been dark

**21** goals have been scored by Lionel Messi across his career, making him the leading marksman in World Cup history

suggestions that Argentina -- trailed everywhere by legions of blue-and-white-clad fans -- have been treated favourably at the World Cup.

Egypt coach Hossam Hassan speculated that the officiating team for the last-16 game may have been subjected to "external pressure" to favour Argentina, a suggestion quashed by FIFA referees chief Pierluigi Collina.

The South Americans face a tough test against an industrious and well-drilled Switzerland team in Kansas City.

The Swiss, led by their influential captain Granit Xhaka, are one win away from reaching their first-ever World Cup semi-final.

Murat Yakin's men eased past Algeria 2-0 in the round of 32 before holding their nerve to beat a strong Colombia team on penalties.

Attacking midfielder Johan Manzanbani was outstanding during the group stage, adding thrust to a team of experienced campaigners and scoring three times.

But Manzanbani missed the match against Colombia with an injury and is a doubt for the Argentina match.

Xhaka, 33, said Switzerland had waited a long time to find such a potent mix of experience and youth.

"I think this generation we have now is a special one," the Sunderland midfielder said.

"Of course, we try to pass on our experience, but above all the mentality that, even as a small nation, anything is possible at this level, in elite football," Xhaka added.

"From the coaching staff to the last player, we can all be proud of what we've achieved."

The winners of the match in Kansas City will face either Norway or England, who clash in Miami, also on Saturday.