Atlanta late show stuns Messi and Miami in MLS playoffs

AFP- Atlanta United snatched a dramatic last-gasp 2-1 playoff victory over Inter Miami on Saturday, jolting Lionel Messi's hopes of leading the Florida club to MLS Cup glory.Portuguese winger Xande Silva blasted home a sensational winner for Atlanta in the fourth minute of stoppage time in front of 68,455 home fans at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium to level the best-of-three postseason series 1-1 and set up a winner-take-all game three in Miami next Saturday.
Top seeds Miami, 2-1 winners in game one last week, had looked to be heading for a series victory after taking the lead through Paraguay international David Martinez in the 40th minute after a terrible blunder by former US goalkeeper Brad Guzan.

Guzan could only watch in horror after he bungled a routine clearance from his own penalty area, allowing Federico Redondo to gather possession and square a pass to Martinez who finished into an empty net for 1-0.

But Atlanta launched a furious second-half onslaught as they battled to save their season and were rewarded when Derrick Williams crashed in a header to equalize in the 58th minute.

An end-to-end game saw both teams create chances thereafter, and Georgia international Saba Lobjanidze almost hooked in a goal for Atlanta in the 89th minute only to see his shot tipped onto the woodwork by Miami goalkeeper Drake Callender.

The game looked poised to go to a penalty shoot-out when Atlanta launched a desperate last raid on the Miami goal, and when Aleksey Miranchuk found Silva, the Portuguese substitute made no mistake and buried a winner into the top corner.

"Words can't describe it, they're such a resilient group," Atlanta coach Rob Valentino said after the win.

“I said to the team before the game it’s everybody together, it’s not going to be one person. And then a substitute comes on and wins us the game.”

– New York level series –

In other MLS playoff action on Saturday, New York City FC defeated FC Cincinnati 3-1 to force a decisive game three in their first-round series.

New York, needing a victory to keep their season alive, took the lead on 22 minutes after Costa Rica international Alonso Martinez worked a clever one-two with Mitja Ilenic before sweeping a low finish past Cincinnati goalkeeper Roman Celentano.

Brazilian defender Thiago Martins doubled New York’s lead five minutes before half-time, heading in at the back post after a free-kick from wide on the right sowed confusion in the Cincinnati defence.

Third seeds Cincinnati hit back on 65 minutes with a superb individual goal from Argentine forward Luca Orellano, who nutmegged his marker before unleashing a thumping left foot shot into the top corner to make it 2-1.

Cincinnati pressed relentlessly for an equalizer in the closing stages, and Zimbabwe international Teenage Hadebe should have leveled in the 80th minute but blasted his close-range shot straight at New York goalkeeper Matt Freese.

In the closing minutes of stoppage time, New York made the game safe, with Uruguayan midfielder Santiago Rodriguez winning a penalty and scoring it himself with a cheeky chipped ‘panenka’ down the middle of the goal.

Game three in the series will take place in Cincinnati next Saturday.

AFP