

The Messi conundrum



Football

AFP, Undated

By common consensus the world's best player, Lionel Messi is shy and softly spoken off the pitch and is more likely to be found playing on his PlayStation than tearing up the dance-floor in his local nightclub.

As problem players go, Messi is not an obvious candidate, but for fans of Argentina he remains a frustrating enigma.

World-beating for Barcelona, he is a different player in the sky blue and white of his country and his record of 17 goals in 62 internationals is a poor return for a man who scores goals in his sleep for Barca.

"I am not going to win any games on my own, just as I don't win games on my own with Barcelona," he protested in a recent interview on Argentine radio.

How to get Messi playing for Argentina like he plays for Barcelona has become something of a national obsession in his homeland, where suspicions fester about his commitment to the country's cause.

Diego Maradona sought to use Messi as a classic playmaker at last year's World Cup in South Africa, declaring: "All the balls have to pass through him."

The result, however, was that Messi became over-burdened and he cut a forlorn and isolated figure in his side's 4-0 quarterfinal annihilation by Germany.

Maradona's successor, Sergio

Batista, sought to remedy the problem by fielding Messi in the elusive 'false nine' role he occupies for Barca, where he starts as the nominal striker but is granted freedom to roam.

However, deployed as such alongside Carlos Tevez and Ezequiel Lavezzi in Argentina's opening two matches at the Copa America, he struggled to influence proceedings and seemed frustrated by the lack of movement ahead of him.

Restored to a deeper role behind Gonzalo Higuain, he shone in a 3-0 defeat of Costa Rica, but was then crowded out in the quarterfinals as the hosts fell on penalties to eventual winners Uruguay.

Argentina clearly need Messi if this generation of players is ever to realise its spectacular potential, but Messi needs Argentina too.

At just 24 he has already won everything there is to win in the domestic game and is Barcelona's second-highest all-time goalscorer, but his only significant achievement in international football is a gold medal from the 2008 Olympics.

His Champions League performances have already granted him sporting immortality, but some will argue that he cannot be compared to Pele and Maradona until he wins a World Cup.

The man charged with leading Argentina to Brazil in 2014 is Alejandro Sabella, a former River Plate playmaker who led Estudiantes to the 2009 Copa Libertadores title.

The 56-year-old installed Messi as his captain shortly after his appointment in August but said the key to

Argentina's fortunes lay in giving their talisman the liberty to express himself.

"We must let him be happy," said Sabella. "We must let him play completely freely on the pitch."

A side shorn of European-based players came out second-best in a recent double-header with Brazil, after successes against Venezuela and Nigeria in Sabella's first games in charge.

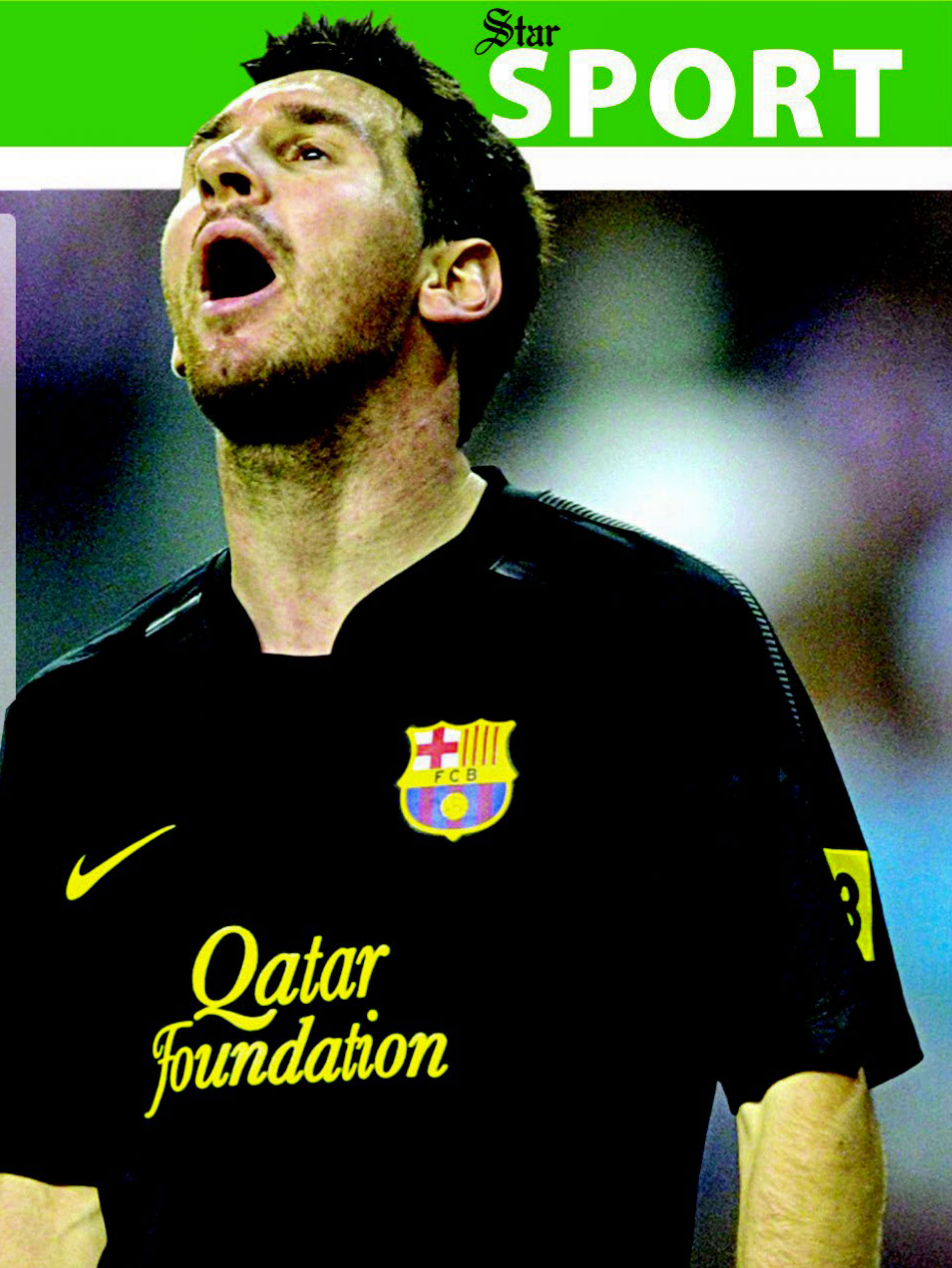
The squad that Sabella named for the first qualifying match at home to Chile on Friday and the trip to Venezuela four days later retained a core of 13 players from the Copa America squad.

Former stalwarts including Tevez, Javier Zanetti and Esteban Cambiasso were dropped, however, to give emerging players like Federico Fernandez, Ricardo Alvarez and Nicolas Gaitan a chance to stake a claim in the team's future.

Sabella is the seventh coach to take charge of Argentina since Carlos Bilardo led the Albiceleste to glory at the 1986 World Cup in Mexico.

Bilardo's masterstroke was the creation of a 3-5-2 system that gave Maradona the freedom to wreak havoc on opposition defences.

With Brazil out of the picture due to their status as hosts, Argentina's success in the qualifiers may depend on Sabella's ability to find a similar solution to the Lionel Messi conundrum.



Rooney's father arrested

AP, London

The father and uncle of Manchester United striker Wayne Rooney were arrested Thursday as part of an investigation into betting irregularities at a Scottish Premier League football match.

A police official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, confirmed Rooney's two relatives were among the nine men arrested in the betting investigation. Police are not authorized to comment publicly about the identity of those arrested.

The younger Rooney, who also plays for England's national team, has not been implicated in the investigation, which focuses on Motherwell's home match against Hearts at Fir Park on Dec. 14. Motherwell lost 2-1.

Merseyside police said Rooney's 48-year-old father, who is also named Wayne, and 54-year-old uncle Richie Rooney were arrested at their homes in Liverpool on suspicion of conspiracy to defraud along with seven other men.

Uruguay on the up

AFP, Undated



Uruguay head into the South American qualifying campaign for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil as favourites in the wake of their stunning triumph at the Copa America in July.

Oscar Washington Tabarez's side won the continental title for a record 15th time, outclassing Paraguay 3-0 in the final after earlier eliminating the hosts Argentina in the last eight.

La Celeste's triumph proved that their run to the semifinals of the 2010 World Cup was not simply a one-off, and also showed that, even today, a small nation of only 3.5 million people can enjoy success on the international stage.

They currently lie fourth in the FIFA world rankings, ahead of the likes of Italy, Brazil, England, Argentina and France.

"To have such international recognition is a real positive," accepts Tabarez. "Today people look at the Uruguayan national team in a different light compared to years gone by. We are respected."

But even without their recent glory,

Uruguay's place in football folklore was assured thanks to their triumph in the first World Cup in 1930.

Nobody in Brazil needs reminding that Uruguay also won the only previous World Cup to be held in South America's largest country when, in 1950, they came from behind to beat the hosts in the deciding game at the Maracana.

"I have always said that Uruguay has a footballing culture like few other countries in the world," the captain Diego Lugano told AFP this week.

"Uruguayans are really enjoying the present, because we have had a lot of success recently."

"The team is one of the best in the world, and we are the champions of South America. There are some great players and the people are really enjoying this period."

"But the happiness has not lasted too long because the qualifiers that are about to begin are a whole new story and in South America the qualifying process is a really tough one."

They may have the smallest population of all the countries in the South American confederation, but most of their rivals in the nine-team qualifying group can only look on in admiration when they see the strength in depth

available to Tabarez.

Almost all of the players named for the opening qualifiers against Bolivia in Montevideo and away to Paraguay in Asuncion ply their trade in Europe's leading leagues.

Paris Saint-Germain's Lugano leads from the back, while their forward line of Diego Forlan (Inter Milan), Edinson Cavani (Napoli) and Luis Suarez (Liverpool) is fearsome.

Many of the current squad are already into their 30s and may well not be around in 2014, but there are young players coming through--witness their performance at the Under-17 World Cup earlier this year, when Uruguay reached the final before losing to hosts Mexico.

In addition, Penarol's recent run to the final of the Copa Libertadores provided a boost to the domestic game.

Nevertheless, Tabarez has done his best to take the focus away from his side in the build-up to the campaign, suggesting that Argentina will be the team to beat.

"Argentina are a real footballing power and they have so much potential in their team," he said, before adding that even his side's first opponents cannot be discounted in a wide-open group.

Guus plots an upset

AFP, Istanbul



Turkey are looking for their third consecutive home win over Germany in Friday's Euro 2012 qualifier with Guus Hiddink's team ready to create an upset as they chase a berth for the finals.

Undefeated in Group A, Germany earned their place at the Euro 2012 finals, to be hosted by the Ukraine and Poland, when they beat Austria 6-2 last month, and Turkey are second so a rare win over the Germans would help their cause.

The best they can hope for is a place in the play-offs as group runners-up.

While Germany have won 13 of their 19 meetings, two of the Turks three wins have come at home thus giving them something to boost their hopes.

However, Hiddink believes that the Germans will be very hard to beat down.

"I see very few weaknesses (in the German team)," said Hiddink.

"It will be a difficult match for us, but don't underestimate our potential."

"We have created some synergy in our last few home games."

Germany are chasing their ninth consecutive victory in their qualification campaign while Turkey are unbeaten from their last six

games.

German Coach Joachim Loew has a potential headache with both key strikers Mario Gomez and Miroslav Klose struggling to benefit.

Veteran Klose broke off training on Wednesday with a painful knee, while Gomez is struggling with a groin strain.

Should both fail to be fit, Loew would have just one available striker in Brazil-born Cacau to call on.

German playmaker Mesut Ozil - son of Turkish immigrants - also missed training on Wednesday because of a sore Achilles tendon and midfielder Toni Kroos is certainly out with 'flu.

Turkey will qualify for the play-offs with a match to spare if they get a better result against Germany than Belgium manage against Kazakhstan, also on Friday.

Left-back Gokhan Gonul has said his team must take four points from their next two games - the final one is against Azerbaijan.

"We also understand the need to take four points in the two matches, which is a worse-case scenario for us," he said.

"We know the power of Germany, they come with an unbeaten record in the group."

"Matches between two teams are prestigious and they are important games for us."

"We know it will be difficult, but not impossible."

Capello to step down

AFP, Undated



Fabio Capello is certain to leave his role as England coach after Euro 2012, Football Association chairman David Bernstein confirmed on Wednesday.

Capello has revealed his intention to step down following the conclusion of England's Euro 2012 campaign, but recent reports suggested some key figures in the FA are keen for him to remain in charge.

However, Bernstein, speaking at the Leaders in Football conference in London on Wednesday, made it clear the former AC Milan and Real Madrid coach would not be extending an England reign that began in December 2007.

"One day he's going to go next week, the next day he's going to stay for 20 years," Bernstein said. "The position is very clear. He is our manager until the end of the European Championship. That is it."

Bernstein also responded to the widespread belief that the FA will offer Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp the chance to replace Capello by admitting his organisation had not started the search for the 65-year-old's successor.

"It is not something on our agenda at the moment. You can't be half-pregnant at these things," he said.

England can book their place at Euro 2012 with a draw against Montenegro on Friday and Bernstein insisted the FA were determined to learn the lessons from the team's woeful 2010 World Cup campaign when they get to the finals in Poland and Ukraine.

He said they would not keep the team isolated in their hotel during Euro 2012--as happened in South Africa--and suggested the squad would be given more opportunities to venture out into the community.



PHOTO: AFP

Uruguay players Andres Scotti (R) and Diego Forlan fight for the ball during a training session in Canelones on Tuesday.

SPORTS POLL

WEEKLY QUESTION

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RCB v NSW

First Semifinal

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One-Day Match

Time: 9:30am

Venue: Fatullah Cricket Stadium