

'THE HAPPINESS IS IMMENSE'



PHOTO: REUTERS/TWITTER



AGENCIES



Lionel Messi was uncharacteristically quiet in Argentina's 1-0 win over Brazil on Saturday but his performance was irrelevant compared to what the victory means - a first major title for Messi in the blue and white of the national side.

The Barcelona striker has won the FIFA World Player of the Year a record six times and is widely considered one of the greatest players ever to play the game, alongside Pele and countryman Diego Maradona.

But his inability to win an international title with Argentina always left an asterisk beside his name on the all-time greats list.

That is now gone after an emotional Copa America final at the Maracana stadium decided by a first half goal from Angel Di Maria.

After losing four times in finals, early exits in major tournaments, and even a decision to retire from the national team, the superstar celebrated a much-awaited title with Argentina.

Until Saturday, Messi's titles with Argentina were only the U-20 World Cup title in 2005 and a gold medal at the Beijing Olympics in 2008. On Saturday Messi kissed the Copa America trophy and lifted it at age 34. The biggest gap in his decorated career is now closed.

The title ended Argentina's 28-year drought of major trophies, with Messi as the best player with four goals and five assists. The captain also broke the team's record for international appearances with 151 matches.

When Uruguayan referee Esteban Ostojich blew the final whistle, Messi knelt down on the pitch and covered his face with his hands.

"The happiness is immense," said Messi after the game as he also praised the attitude of the

KEY STATS

- Argentina won their first major title in 28 years.
- The victory was Argentina's 15th Copa America triumph and they are now level with Uruguay as the all-time leading winners.
- Argentina superstar Lionel Messi finally earned his first medal in a blue-and-white shirt.

Golden Boot (top scorer) award:
Lionel Messi (Argentina)

Golden Glove (best goalkeeper) award:
Emiliano Martinez (Argentina)

Golden Ball (best player) award:
Lionel Messi (Argentina)

Best-Player-of-final:
Angel di Maria (Argentina)

Most goals scored: Argentina and Brazil (12 goals)

Least goals scored: Venezuela and Bolivia (2 goals)

Top 3 goal-scorers:
Lionel Messi (Argentina) - 4 goals, Luis Diaz (Colombia) - 4 goals, Lautaro Martinez (Argentina) - 3 goals, Gianluca Lapadula (Peru) - 3 goals.

Top 3 playmakers: Lionel Messi (Argentina) - 5 assists, Neymar (Brazil) - 3 assists, Christian Cueva (Peru) - 2 assists.

Argentina squad. "Many times I dreamed of this. "I had a lot of confidence in this group that became very strong since the last Copa America. It is a group of very good people, who always push forward, who never complain about anything."

And while many will say his greatness has been cemented, regardless of what he achieves with Argentina, this lengthy wait for a maiden senior trophy with his country will go a long way to silencing any doubters.

Repeated failures with Argentina have been painful for the forward, who went as far as announcing his retirement - before later reversing the decision - after losing a second consecutive Copa America final in 2016, his third defeat in the final of the competition and coming just two years after suffering a loss in the 2014 World Cup final.

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni paid tribute to Lionel Messi, praising his team captain and revealing he played in the Copa America win over Brazil with an injury.

"If you knew the way that he played in the Copa America you'd love him even more," Scaloni told the reporters. "You can never do without a player like him, even when he is not fully fit like in this game and the previous one."

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The 34-year old had shown his frustration with the defeats, retiring after losing the 2016 Copa America to Chile only to return to the international fold a few weeks later.

"In the end he did not throw in the towel and he succeeded," Scaloni said.

"We are talking about the best footballer of all time and everyone knew how important it was for him to win a title with the national team."

There also remains the prospect of Messi going for what would likely be his last chance of winning the World Cup - something Argentina have not done since 1986 - should he lead his country out in Qatar at the age of 35 in December 2022.

ANGEL deserved to rise

Angel Di Maria, starting for just the second time in the Copa America, justified his selection by scoring the opener midway through the first half that gave Argentina a 1-0 victory over Brazil in the final at the Maracana Stadium.

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Di Maria applied a sumptuous finish to a Rodrigo de Paul delivery to lift the ball past Brazil keeper Ederson for the only goal of the game.

In the process, Di Maria scored his first Argentina goal in 13 games spanning three years, last netting for Albiceleste in the 2-4 Round-of-16 defeat against eventual champions France at the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia.

The goal helped the 33-year-old snapped the longest scoring drought of his international career.

Di Maria once admitted that he sought out a psychologist to help him deal with the trauma of his performance in finals.

"I can't cry, I can't fall, we dreamed so much of achieving this. So many people said I shouldn't come back, I kept banging my head against the wall and today it happened," the veteran winger said after the match in Rio de Janeiro.

The winger had several setbacks due to injury. He did not play in the 2014 World Cup final due to an injury in the quarterfinals against Belgium. One year later, another muscle injury forced him out during the Copa America final against Chile. He was also unfit during the Copa America Centenario decider in 2016.

That was when Di Maria started seeing a psychiatrist. Argentina fans wanted him out of the squad, but he turned the tables on them on Saturday, despite the fact he started the tournament as a substitute.

After the game, Di Maria revealed what Lionel Messi told him after the match. "Messi told me thanks to me, I said thanks to him! He told me that it was my final, that it was the rematch for the finals that I couldn't play. It had to be today and today it was," Di Maria told reporters after the summit clash.

He added: "I am happy for my daughters, my wife, my parents, all the people who supported us and for all the crazy people who came here."

Di Maria, however, not only overcame all the trauma on Saturday with the goal but also brought immense joy for their superstar—Lionel Messi.



FRIENDSHIP IS WHAT PREVAILS

During the final of Copa America 2021 between two eternal archenemies, the two superstars of the game refused to give each other even the slightest bit of advantage on the pitch at the Maracana. But after the game, when the overwhelming emotions had subsided, and when the blood, sweat and tears had dried, fans witnessed something greater than the occasion, something much superior than the dramatic game that had transpired. Everybody had the privilege to see a glimpse of the incredible bond between the two talismans that was forged out of comradeship over the years triumph above all else. And this powerful interaction alone reminds everybody that football, at the end of the day, is just a game and the essence of sportsmanship and friendship is what prevails ultimately and makes the game truly beautiful.