



Argentine skipper Lionel Messi is set to make his fifth and final appearance at the World Cup as the Albiceleste begin their campaign in Qatar through their game against Saudi Arabia at the Lusail Stadium today. The 35-year-old will hope to lead his side a step further than he did in the 2014 edition when they fell short in the final.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## 7 captains perform 'OneLove' armband u-turn

AFP, Doha

England, Germany and five other European teams at the World Cup on Monday abandoned plans to wear a rainbow-themed armband in support of LGBTQ rights, citing the threat of disciplinary action from FIFA.

"FIFA has been very clear that it will impose sporting sanctions if our captains wear the armbands on the field of play," the seven teams said in a joint statement.

Under FIFA rules, players wearing kit that is not authorised by football's world governing body could be shown a yellow card.

If that player was then shown a second yellow card, they would be sent off.

The "OneLove" armband due to be worn by the likes of England captain Harry Kane and Germany counterpart Manuel Neuer is designed as part of a campaign to promote inclusivity.

The armbands had widely been viewed as a symbolic protest against laws in the World Cup host nation Qatar, where homosexuality is illegal.

## Messi's last shot at immortality begins with Saudi clash

AGENCIES

Lionel Messi's Argentina have an easy-looking start to the World Cup on Tuesday based on blistering recent form and opponents Saudi Arabia's history of drubbings in tournament openers.

The South Americans are on a 36-match unbeaten run with top scorer and captain Messi playing his fifth and last World Cup in search of the elusive honour that would grant him immortality at home alongside Diego Maradona.

"I see him as always ... eager to enjoy the World Cup," said head coach Lionel Scaloni, trying to ease some of the pressure on his main man. "He's enjoying his team mates, training sessions, the stay and the whole process."

But Messi, the seven-time Ballon d'Or winner, is running out of time and opportunities.

The Qatar extravaganza will likely be the last World Cup for both Messi and his long-time nemesis Cristiano Ronaldo of Portugal, believed by many to be the two greatest footballers of all time.

Unlike previous contenders for the title of greatest of all time - Brazil's Pele and Maradona of Argentina - at least one, and maybe both, will never lift football's greatest prize. Yet in the case of Messi, this may well be his best chance to win that elusive prize.

He cut a distraught figure in 2014 after Argentina succumbed 1-0 to Germany in the final in Brazil, even briefly announcing his international retirement in 2016.

He changed his mind and last year led Argentina to their first

major title in 28 years, defeating hosts Brazil in the Copa America final by the same scoreline and in the same Maracana stadium where they had floundered seven years earlier.

Facing Messi today will be Saudi Arabia, who have their share of rocky World Cup campaigns, but midfielder Abdullah Al-Malki insists he will not be overawed by the occasion.

"He's a legend and it's a dream for any player to play against him, but we represent Saudi Arabia and we fear no-one," he said.

Saudi Arabia are ranked 48 places lower than Argentina, lost to Venezuela, Colombia and Croatia in a mixed bag of friendlies, and have a dismal record at opening games including losing 5-0 to Russia in 2018 and 8-0 to Germany in 2002.

Yet they have pedigree too: this is their sixth World Cup, they reached the last 16 in 1994, and they made it to Qatar by topping their group ahead of Japan.

"I saw a country full of young, talented players. We achieved our first target, let's work together for the rest," said Saudi coach Herve Renard.

Both teams will be noisily and massively supported when they meet for the day's first game in the Lusail Stadium, the tournament's largest venue which will also host the final.

Thousands of Saudis will flock over the border while Argentina's traditionally large following will be swelled by a burgeoning fan base in Qatar and around the Middle East.

And both Argentina and Messi will hope to deliver for their fans both at home and Qatar.

### MASH'S PREDICTION

**ROUND OF 16**

- Netherlands vs USA
- Argentina vs Denmark
- Germany vs Croatia
- Brazil vs Uruguay
- England vs Qatar
- France vs Poland
- Belgium vs Spain
- Portugal vs Switzerland

**QUARTER-FINALS**

- Netherlands vs Argentina
- Germany vs Brazil
- England vs France
- Spain vs Portugal

**SEMI-FINALS**

- Argentina vs Germany
- France vs Spain

**FINAL**

- Argentina vs Spain

**THIRD-PLACE**

- Germany vs France

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**ARGENTINA VS SAUDI ARABIA**

Argentina have won their last five games, netting 19 times without conceding any.

Lionel Messi has scored 10 goals in his last four games for Argentina.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, come into the World Cup on the back of a dismal run as they have won only twice in their last 10 matches.

Saudi Arabia have failed to progress beyond the group stages in each of their last four World Cup appearances.

**HEAD-TO-HEAD**

Matches 4  
 Argentina 2  
 Saudi Arabia 0  
 Draw 2

**PLAYERS TO WATCH**

**Lionel Messi** (Argentina)  
 Caps 165  
 Goals 91

**Salem Al-Dawsari** (Saudi Arabia)  
 Caps 71  
 Goals 17

**GOAL** কল্প একটাই  
 মুখ থাকবে সবাই

পাইনোকোলজি বিভাগ (ক্রীড়া বিশেষজ্ঞ)

আপনার সেরা ক্রীড়া ক্লাবের জন্য

## Iran ditch national anthem

AFP, Doha

Iran's players did not sing their national anthem before their first game of the World Cup against England on Monday, in apparent support for anti-government protesters in their homeland.

Ahead of the game in Qatar, captain Alireza Jahanbakhsh said the team would decide together whether or not to refuse to sing the anthem in a show of solidarity for demonstrations that have rocked the regime in Iran.

The Iranian players stood impassively and grimaced as their anthem rang out around the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha.

Iran has been shaken by two months of nationwide protests since the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in morality police custody on September 16.

Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian of Kurdish origin, died three days after her arrest in Tehran over an alleged breach of the Islamic republic's dress code for women, which includes the mandatory hijab headscarf.

Some Iranian athletes have chosen not to sing the national anthem or celebrate their victories in support of the protesters.

Jahanbakhsh, who used to play for English club Brighton, was angered last week by a question from a British journalist about the anthem issue.



Poland striker Robert Lewandowski seems all set to let loose in their World Cup opener against Mexico in Doha today as the Barcelona forward hopes to score his first goal in the mega event.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Ochoa stands in Lewy's path to first World Cup goal

AGENCIES

Poland goalkeeper Wojciech Szczesny believes Robert Lewandowski will break his World Cup duck in Qatar and help his side reach the knockout phase for the first time since 1986, but the prolific forward will find regular World Cup performer Guillermo Ochoa standing in his way between the sticks of Mexico at the Stadium 974 in Doha on Tuesday.

Lewandowski is Poland's record scorer with 76 goals in 134 games but the Barcelona star failed to find the net four years ago in Russia as the Poles exited from the group stage.

The 34-year-old has struck 25 times across the last two World Cup qualifying campaigns but has yet to open his account at the finals.

"I think it's definitely important for him (to score)," Szczesny told reporters Monday on the eve of Poland's opening game against Mexico.

"He's very motivated before the World Cup. No one doubts that Robert is one of the best players in the world right now."

After eight record-breaking seasons at Bayern Munich, Lewandowski has been just as prolific in his first season with Barcelona - hitting 18 goals in 19 appearances.

But Lewandowski will be facing a stern challenge from the Mexican stopper Ochoa, who attained somewhat of a cult hero status when it comes to World Cups as the keeper often steals the show for Mexico with stunning saves that defy his diminutive stature.

"Everyone, from when they are children, wants to play play against the best in the best competitions," said the 37-year-old Ochoa, who currently holds the record for the highest number of appearances as a goalkeeper for Mexico.

"I want to play a good game against them [Poland]. I want to show that Mexico are a capable side," Ochoa said.

But Szczesny backed Lewandowski to lead the line for the Poles.

"He would definitely like to see his ambitions come true, not only at club level but for his national team. This is a very important tournament.

"I do believe we'll add Robert Lewandowski to the great names of Polish football with what he does in Qatar."

Poland have failed to get past the group phase in their past three World Cups appearances, the last of which saw Szczesny punished for a mistake in the first match against Senegal.

**INFO ZONE**

**MEXICO VS POLAND HEAD-TO-HEAD**

Matches 8  
 Mexico 3  
 Poland 3  
 Draw 2

**PLAYERS TO WATCH**

**Hirving Lozano** (Mexico)  
 Caps 60  
 Goals 16

**Robert Lewandowski** (Poland)  
 Caps 134  
 Goals 76