



## 'La Arana' targets stardom after meteoric rise

AFP, Doha

Julian Alvarez came to the World Cup as a peripheral figure for Argentina but is preparing for Sunday's final against France as their new star in attack.

The young Manchester City forward started just one of Argentina's World Cup qualifiers and came to Qatar behind Inter Milan forward Lautaro Martinez in the pecking order.

The 22-year-old was unable to make a mark as a substitute as the Copa America champions started their campaign in Doha with a shock 2-1 defeat at the hands of Saudi Arabia.

But in retrospect that could have been his "sliding doors" moment.

Lautaro twice put the ball in the net against the Saudis but both times he was denied by an offside flag.

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni stuck with Lautaro for the second game -- a 2-0 win against Mexico -- but Alvarez was in the starting line-up for the decisive match against Poland and has not looked back since.



The forward, nicknamed "La Arana" (The Spider), sealed victory with a fine finish into the top corner midway through the second half in the 2-0 win against Poland.

He scored the crucial second goal in the 2-1 victory over Australia in the round of 16 and then caused the Netherlands plenty of problems in the quarter-final.

In the semis, the marauding forward won a penalty that Messi converted and scored twice in a 3-0 win against 2018 finalists Croatia.

Alvarez now has four goals in this tournament, placing him just one behind joint top scorers Messi and France's Kylian Mbappe.

It was a performance that left Scaloni purring. "At his age it is normal that he wants to conquer the world. He is a boy who will do whatever you say to him," he said.

Alvarez's rise has been meteoric. Premier League champions City snapped up the player on January 31 this year -- transfer deadline day and the player's 22nd birthday -- for just 17 million euros (\$18 million).

Instead of travelling to England he stayed at River Plate on loan until the end of the season.

Alvarez has plenty of competition at the Etihad -- not least from the newly arrived Erling Haaland, who is already ripping up the record books.

City boss Pep Guardiola has picked the Argentine in his starting 11 just three times in the Premier League this season, though he has scored three times in those matches.

He will know he has to bide his time at the Etihad but when he returns he can press his case, possibly with a World Cup winners' medal to show for his efforts.

## Immortality or the dawn of a new era?

SHABAB CHOWDHURY

A shift has already occurred, tectonic plates have collided resulting in the dusk of the old and the emergence of new horizons. At the footballing forefront, France's Kylian Mbappe readies to win his second World Cup as he looks to come forth as the face of the next generation of megastars but faces the old guard in Argentina's Lionel Messi, who has yet again carried his side to the cusp of glory.

The PSG teammates will lock horns as Messi, a marvel unlike any other, gears up for his last date with destiny, for his last dance to achieve footballing immortality and join the pantheon of all-time greats like Diego Maradona and Pele.

On the opposite side, when it comes to the World Cup, Mbappe has already been there and done that at the tender age of 19, taking the world by storm as he lifted the World Cup in 2018. Four years later, the French superstar has the world at his feet. With a successive World Cup win, he would be within inches of being heralded in the same company as Portuguese star Cristiano Ronaldo and of course Messi, albeit with the caveat that he needs to produce at least for a decade more to be in true consideration.

With five goals each from the focal point of their teams' success, the sizzling Mbappe and Messi contest will certainly play a decisive role in who takes home the Golden Ball, the Golden Boot, eventually the Ballon d'Or and, of course, the World Cup trophy.

Mbappe has again come through as France's savior, coming up with vital goals and assists as the defending champions look to him to conjure something out of nothing. Blistering pace, twinkling feet and the ease with which he can go past players along with the attitude to go direct and his unique blend of guile and finesse are hallmarks that have seen the 23-year-old

give the opposition nightmare even before games.

But seven-time Ballon d'Or winner Messi has brought his Midas touch to the World Cup too. The 35-year-old has rubbished any lingering doubts about him being past his best with mesmerising displays that often have made the difference for Argentina in this campaign.

With the earnest hunger of winning the only trophy that has eluded him, the Argentine skipper has led from the front in crunch situations, especially after the loss to Saudi Arabia in the opening fixture.

It has been a different kind of display for Messi this time around as he has had to come to terms with the fact that he is no longer the 19-year-old exuberant Barcelona winger. But having said that, the 35-year-old has produced a complete, well-rounded display throughout the tournament as he has seen defending near his own box, doing the extra leg-work to free-up teammates, all topped off with the usual serving of assists and goals.

Having produced one of the most memorable World Cup assists to send Molina through on goal against the Netherlands, sweeping past Croatia's Josko Gvardiol with a drop of that mythical shoulder or the long-ranger from 30 yards against Mexico, Messi has given more than a fair share for fans to remember.

With only Mbappe's France in the way of his destiny, the Argentine legend will look to give his absolute best to kiss the golden trophy.

As the greatest show on earth nears its end, debates on who deserves the bragging rights of being called the best player spur on. A lot of that might just be settled after the final whistle. Who will wear the crown out of Qatar? Will it still adorn the king or will it be the heir to the throne that ends his majesty's final shot at the ultimate prize?



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#### ARGENTINA VS FRANCE

**HEAD-TO-HEAD**

Matches **12**  
 Argentina **6**  
 France **3**  
 Draw **3**

**PLAYERS TO WATCH**

**Lionel Messi (Argentina)**  
 Caps **171**  
 Goals **96**

**Kylian Mbappe (France)**  
 Caps **65**  
 Goals **33**

### KEY STATS

Argentina are playing in their sixth World Cup final, having won in 1978 and 1986, and being runners-up in 1930, 1990 and 2014.

Argentina have lost only one of their last 42 international matches (W29 D12). They have scored 12 goals at Qatar 2022 -- their highest total since 1986 when they scored 14.

Argentina captain Lionel Messi will be playing in his second World Cup final after his team lost to Germany in 2014. The World Cup trophy is the only major title missing from his collection.

France are playing in their fourth World Cup final, having won in 1998 and 2018, and finished runners-up in 2006.

France have become the first back-to-back finalists since Brazil in 2002, and will be looking to become only the third nation to have won two consecutive World Cups, alongside Italy (1934 and 1938) and Brazil (1958 and 1962).

Kylian Mbappe has scored five times in six games, surpassing his tally from the 2018 tournament. The 23-year-old has scored nine World Cup goals in 13 appearances.

### PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Argentina and France have played each other three times in the World Cup, last meeting in Russia in 2018 when France won 4-3 in the round of 16. Argentina won the first two meetings in 1930 and 1978.



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## 'GriezmannKante' set to sail France ship to triumphant shore

REUTERS, Doha

Less than two years ago, Antoine Griezmann was wandering around like a lost soul in La Liga after a tough time at Barcelona and a rough return to Atletico Madrid but on Sunday he could lay claim to being France's greatest player.

While Kylian Mbappe will also be a double world champion if Les Bleus beat Argentina in the final at the Lusail Stadium and could win the tournament's Golden Boot, Griezmann has been the cornerstone of France's success since Didier Deschamps took over in 2012.

He has played in a record 73 consecutive matches for France, led them to the Euro 2016 final, was man-of-the-match in the 2018 World Cup final and this year has seamlessly switched roles to midfield to great effect.

A forward who was Euro 2016's top scorer and the silver boot winner as the second-highest goalscorer at the 2018 World Cup, Griezmann has adjusted his role after Deschamps was forced to recalibrate his midfield due to the absences of Ngolo Kante, Paul Pogba and Karim Benzema.

Griezmann, who has been revelling in his new role -- his guile, craft and poise making him the perfect player to wreak havoc between the lines.

"Being well physically helps me a lot. There are no problems in my private life," said Griezmann. "In my head I had tough moments at Barca and last year when I came back to Atletico. It was complicated, I had to make myself very small, I had to find myself, on and off the pitch."

Griezmann has grown big in stature again. Very big indeed.

"GriezmannKante", Pogba labelled his team mate on social media after the 2-0 semi-final win against Morocco.

"He has surprised me but he has the quality and intelligence to do it. He looks more like Kante than Griezmann," said former Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba.

Griezmann's joie de vivre off the pitch has also been key to France's success. Beside being the link between the midfield and the front line on the pitch, he has also created a great atmosphere within the squad, bridging the young generation with the team leaders.

dances in the dressing room to the sounds of Gala's 'Freed from desire' - yelling 'Vive la Republique, vive la France!'. .

While he has not scored in his last 15 games for France, Griezmann has become the national team's best goal provider of all time with 28 assists.

No wonder that he is Deschamps's main man on the pitch, the one he discusses tactics with.

While Griezmann feels he owes Deschamps a lot for always keeping faith with him, the coach is also aware of the player's importance.

"He's the type of player who can really change a team because he's so hard working and so technically gifted," said Deschamps.

"He's playing a slightly different role in this World Cup, but it suits him well. As I said earlier, he likes defending just as much as attacking and being a playmaker.

"Of course, his main responsibility isn't ball winning; his left foot is so wonderful, he creates great chances for others. He's someone who always thinks of the good of the team above everything else. He's extremely hard working, probably more so than most players."

