



WE'RE CHAMPIONS of the world: Messi

REUTERS, Lusail

As fireworks exploded and some 80,000 people roared, Lionel Messi smiled. His Argentina jersey covered by the bishit the Emir of Qatar had just draped him in – the cape reserved for top officials and sheikhs. He smiled, he paused, then he hoisted high the World Cup, a lifetime's dream realised.

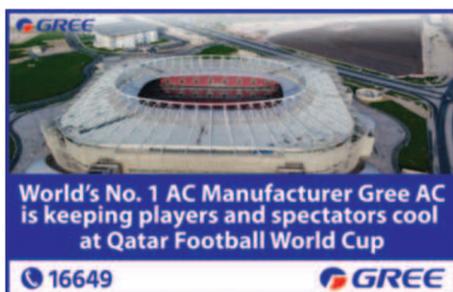
For all the accolades, all the awards, the riches, titles and silverware, there had been one stain on his career resume, and it was one he erased forever on a magical World Cup night for Argentina.

"It's anyone's childhood dream," Messi said. "I was lucky to have achieved everything in this career... and this one that was missing is here.

"It's madness... look how she (the World Cup) is, she's gorgeous. I wanted her so much. I had a vision that this would be the one... she was getting closer."

Tens of thousands of blue and white-shirted Argentina fans rose to salute Messi as he told them "we're champions of the world!" on the stadium microphone.

On this patch of green in the Qatari desert all that mattered to the 35-year-old was to deliver the much-yearned-for World Cup to Argentina, and he did so with



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a virtuoso performance against defending champions France in what transpired to be a final for the ages.

Having steered Argentina to a 2-0 lead which they blew in the final 10 minutes, he then put them ahead in extra-time, before finally converting his penalty in the shootout which they ultimately won.

As tens of thousands of Argentines packed into the febrile stadium jumped and hugged and cried and screamed, so too did the Argentine team, sobbing freely

and mobbing the man who has been their talisman for a generation.

It had taken five attempts, and a record 26 World Cup finals matches, but the boy from Rosario – the farm hub city some 300 kilometres north of Buenos Aires – finally delivered to lift himself alongside that other Argentina footballing deity, Diego Maradona, who had taken his nation to the title in 1986.

"We suffer, but we already have it (the World Cup)," Messi said. "I wanted to close my career with this, I can no longer ask for anything else, thank God, he gave me everything."

He had arrived in Qatar with the dreams of a nation on his shoulders once again.

Eight years ago in a World Cup final in Rio de Janeiro, Messi had been muted, not magical and had seemed wearied by the weight of expectation as Argentina fell in the final to Germany.

This time, though, he wore it lightly, seemingly inspired by the desperation seeping from every voice in the stands.

Can't believe we suffered so much, says Scaloni

REUTERS, Lusail

Argentina were made to suffer before landing their first World Cup title in 36 years, having twice squandered a lead, including in extra-time before edging past defending champions France 4-2 on penalties in the final on Sunday.

"It was a game where we suffered," said Argentina goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez, who saved one penalty in the shootout on Sunday but had also saved two more spot kicks in their quarter-final against Netherlands.

On a night of high drama and fluctuating



'The dream did not come true'

AFP, Doha

France coach Didier Deschamps said the way his team lost Sunday's World Cup final against Argentina was "cruel" after they came from behind twice over the course of the game only to succumb in a penalty shoot-out.

"We were not as good in the first 60 minutes against top-quality opponents who had a lot more energy, but we came back from nowhere and turned the game around from a very difficult situation. That leaves us with even more regrets," said Deschamps after France failed in their bid to become the first team in 60 years

to retain the trophy.

Kylian Mbappe scored twice in two minutes late on in Doha to cancel out Argentina's two-goal lead and force extra time, in which he scored again from a penalty to complete his hat-trick and make it 3-3 after Lionel Messi had put the opposition back in front.

Randal Kolo Muani was then denied a last-gasp winner by goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez, and Argentina won the shoot-out 4-2, with France's Kingsley Coman seeing his penalty saved and Aurelien Tchouameni missing the target.

"We had a chance to win the World Cup in the last minute but it wasn't to be," Deschamps said.

"At 2-0 there would not have been the same regrets, you just say 'bravo' to them.

"I don't want to take any merit away from Argentina but there were lots and lots of emotions and it was cruel at the end because we were so close."

Deschamps suggested that the virus which laid low several of his

players in the run-up to the final was partly to blame for their poor performance over the first hour.

"There were many reasons which explained why we were not as good. Several important players had less energy but bringing on younger players with less experience but plenty of freshness and quality allowed us to keep dreaming.

"But unfortunately the dream did not come true."

France captain Hugo Lloris admitted Sunday's World Cup final defeat to Lionel Messi's Argentina was "cruel" and likened the pulsating showpiece to a "boxing match".

"It was like a boxing match, we went blow for blow," said goalkeeper Lloris who hailed his side after the defending champions had been 2-0 down with just 10 minutes left in normal time before Kylian Mbappe scored twice in quick succession.

"We didn't give up. We needed a winner and it was decided on penalties. That's always cruel. We are empty."

Lloris was beaten by all four Argentine penalties in the shootout, including one from Messi who had already scored twice in the game.

"We could have let it slip at 2-0 but we continued to believe that we could turn the game around," added Lloris, who will turn 36 later this month.

"We must congratulate Argentina who played a great tournament and a great final."



fortunes, Argentina squandered a 2-0 lead in regular time before going back in front in extra-time with Lionel Messi's second goal. But then Kylian Mbappe completed his hat-trick to level 3-3 in the 118th minute with France's second penalty that forced the shootout.

For Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni it was a nail biting finish to a turbulent tournament and he could not hold back his tears following the final whistle.

"I cannot believe that we have suffered so much in a perfect game. Unbelievable, but this team responds to everything," Scaloni said.

"I am proud of the work they did. It is an exciting group. With the blows we received today, with the draws, this makes you emotional. I want to tell people to enjoy, it's a historic moment for our country.

"We who live for this and who have been through the good and the bad are used to these things... Above all it is an incredible enjoyment. Being at the top as we are now is something unique."

It was the third world title for Argentina and the first since the late Diego Maradona won the trophy almost single-handedly in 1986.

For Argentina players and captain Messi, who netted twice in the 120 minutes before also scoring in the shootout, it was the biggest title of their careers.

