



# Messi the Dios of happiness

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How should one remember December 18? It may as well be known as the GOAT day. The coronation of *the King*, who completed football. The story, with a fairytale ending for one of the greatest to play the game and what had come to pass before and the joy thereafter, makes it one of sport's greatest. For France, it was 120 minutes in the Lionel Messi territory and some more. For Argentina, they had to do it under the spirited gaze of Kylian Mbappe, always on the hunt. That only made Messi's coronation that much sweeter in the end.

The match? It was anything beyond expectation.

Surreal. Unbelievable. Those are the words one is looking for. In what was probably one of the best tournaments in the competition's fabled story, delivering earth shattering competition throughout this edition, the greatest show on earth reserved its very best spectacle for the final. The battle, the raw skill, and stories, lots of them. Until the time that Angel Di Maria left the pitch in the 64th minute, he was the player of the final. Overloading the left flank, to the surprise of all tactical minds, the Argentine delivered when it mattered most, giving Argentina one hand on the trophy.

Then France brought in an injection of pace and youth, subbing heroes like Olivier Giroud and Antoine Griezmann to shift the tide. Yet, for 75 mins, Argentina dominated in a way they did not this tournament.

Suddenly, it all changed. Mbappe struck when it mattered and then did it again. It ended 2-2 at full time, Argentina barely standing, Mbappe now dominating and ready for more. The challenger? He was like no other Messi or perhaps anyone faced in a final before.

Mbappe has it all. The touch, grit and skill. At 23, he is the archetype of physical gift full of guile. Suddenly, Argentina could not hold him back or the forceful France, with the game becoming increasingly physical. At 35, Messi is running on creativity and extraordinary awareness, carrying the burdens of age but more



acutely, great expectations.

Mbappe's name reverberated through the game like his teenage mutant nickname. Turning defenders, leaving them slipping and sliding. Thus, like Gandalf the Grey and the Balrog, the super duo of PSG, remarkably at the opposite end of their agencies, spiraled down the dungeons of Moria, through to the bitter end.

How did it end before the very end?

In complete anarchy. "Like a kid's kickabout when it's going dark and it's next goal wins. Totally broken, wide open," Guardian reporter Sid Lowe wrote on Twitter. Messi, who Opta stats later revealed had faced 45 more instances of high pressure than the second-best in the tournament, found life with another goal. It appeared he would not be denied. But then

Mbappe comeback with another penalty. Then two chances in the final minute at each end. Abysmal. Of expectations and pressure.

Even at 35, Messi had lost something in those jinking runs. Four finals lost with Argentina before he had retired once before coming back. His present coach Lionel Scaloni had tweeted a picture of Messi then, taking on five or six Chile players with the caption 'this picture says it all... don't go Lio.'

This Argentina team, forged by powerful bonds and powerful failures and always together, has the mark of Messi's grit of always being in the fight. So instead of Messi and 10 others, Argentina were Messi along with 10 warriors and some more. A fist.

The Saviour?

It turned out to be Emi Martinez, who had made the save of the World Cup in the 120th minute. Messi led the penalty kicks under that huge burden. Then Emi had his turn and there was no turning back for Argentina. "Football of this type dispels any rivalry," Brazil great Ronaldo, El Fenomenon, wrote.

The arguments on Messi's GOAT battle with Cristiano Ronaldo also ends. For some, Mbappe is the challenger but he is not Messi's to take on any longer.

The lines on that trophy, the World Cup, represents two athletes 'at the stirring moment of victory' according to its sculptor. How fitting in the end, to the bitter end of the penalties, Messi, in his final dance, more lifelike and yet surreal.

# Benzema ends France career

AFP, Paris

Ballon D'Or winner Karim Benzema announced he was ending his international career on Monday, the day after France lost in the World Cup final to Argentina.

"I made the effort and the mistakes it took to be where I am today and I'm proud of it! I wrote my story and ours ends," Benzema, 35, wrote on Twitter.

Benzema, who scored 37 goals for France in 97 appearances, had to withdraw from France's World Cup squad before their first match due to a left thigh injury.

The Real Madrid player, who won the Ballon d'Or award in October, had been desperate to feature in Qatar having not been selected when France won the World Cup in Russia four years ago.

He was frozen out of the France team for five and a half years because of his involvement in a blackmail scandal over a sextape involving his former teammate Mathieu Valbuena.

In a trial last year he was handed a one-year suspended prison sentence and fined 75,000 euros (\$79,500).

For the Qatar World Cup, coach Didier Deschamps opted not to call up a replacement and France still had depth in their squad, particularly in an attack led by 23-year-old Kylian Mbappe.

Paris Saint-Germain forward Mbappe won the World Cup Golden Boot award with eight goals, including a hat-trick in Sunday's penalty shootout defeat by Argentina following a 3-3 draw at the end of extra time.



# From doubted to immortalised

ATIQUE ANAM from Doha

Lionel Scaloni hardly ever shows emotion in the dugout. Whether his team scores a crucial goal or a spectacular one, he hardly moves a facial muscle, let alone unleash a joyous celebration like the ones you see from most coaches around the world. He sits there with a straight face, like a monk deep in meditation.

He only lets all those emotions flow once the target is achieved as we have seen a number of times in Qatar - Scaloni hugging his players, crying with them and laughing.

From a tactician deeply engrossed in reading the opposition's strategy and working out his next moves, Scaloni suddenly becomes one of the players, giving them the assurance of a friend in guise of a guide and fellow warrior.

Now that warrior, that friend has guided Argentina to an elusive third World Cup, breaking a 36-year drought - becoming the youngest coach to win a World Cup title.

And this latest success comes on the back of two morale-boosting triumphs - a first Copa America title in 28 years with a final win against Brazil last year followed by a smashing win in the Finalissima against European champions Italy.

No matter what happens next, Scaloni will certainly go down as one of the most iconic coaches coming out of South America, which seemed a long shot just four years ago when he was made the head coach following the country's

disastrous World Cup campaign in Russia under Jorge Sampaoli.

As more illustrious names such as Mauricio Pochettino and Diego Simeone declined to take the job, the Argentine FA took a risk by giving Scaloni the full-time job. The decision was met with widespread opposition in his home country, not least from former players including Diego Maradona, who called the choice a crazy one.

The late Argentina icon had good reason to be skeptical though as Scaloni was very young, only 40 at the time, and crucially he did not have the profile either as a coach or former player to take charge of such a high-profile team. Or so it seemed.

A former national team wingback who made only seven appearances for his country, Scaloni had just two years of coaching experience as an understudy to Sampaoli - first at Sevilla and then with the Albiceleste - when he was entrusted with the job of rebuilding Argentina, a team at its zenith in terms of morale after the Russia World Cup and back-to-back final losses in Copa America.

He had to instill confidence in that team and the first thing he did was call up Lionel Messi and convince him to reverse his retirement. Scaloni had Juan Pablo Aimar and Walter Samuel in his coaching staff, both in the infancy of their coaching careers but good rapport with the current players. They also elevated Aston Villa goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez to the No. 1 position, reaping massive

rewards for their faith.

Apart from his man management skill, Scaloni has proved that he is on par with the best minds of the game, using the flexibility of his players to great effect by switching formation from game to game. The move to employ Angel di Maria on the left flank rather than his preferred right proved to be a masterstroke eventually, with the Juventus forward setting the tone for Argentina's victory by earning a spot kick and then scoring the second goal.

Argentina had their lapses, too, in this tournament - giving away two-goal advantages against both the Netherlands and France - but then Scaloni's charges showed their strength of character and streetlight attitude to recover and win. This characteristic of the team is something not quite associated with Argentina teams of the past three decades.

After winning the Copa America last year, Scaloni said he had a talk with Messi as both of them started to believe in the team and believe they were building up to something truly significant. That belief culminated at the Lusail Iconic Stadium on Sunday night, and Scaloni was proud of himself and his charges.

"It wasn't in my plans to be world champion. It's madness," Scaloni said as he wiped away the tears after the final. "There is no bigger pride than representing your country and I hope we made our fans proud."

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