



RONALDO



MESSI

Even though I've played with him many times, I still can't begin to understand the things he does. He's not human. He can't be. He's an alien. Leo is the greatest player in history. I'm very proud of my career, but the best thing I'll have to look back on was playing with Leo.

ANGEL DI MARIA

TRIVIA

- Messi has made an unparalleled 19 appearances as captain in the World Cup. He is followed by Rafa Marquez (17) and Diego Maradona (16).
- Messi is the only player to score in the group stage, last 16, quarterfinals, semifinals and final of one World Cup.
- Pele and Messi share the record for the most combined goals and assists in World Cup history: 21.
- Messi has won a record 11 Player of the Match awards at the World Cup.



is excellent. He believes he can do anything with the ball, and that confidence makes him very special indeed.

EUSEBIO

TRIVIA

- After bagging his 100th strike for Al Nassr in August 2025, Ronaldo became the first player to hit a century of goals for four different clubs. He managed a record 450 for Real Madrid, 145 for Manchester United and 101 in three seasons with Juventus.
- He was named The Best FIFA Men's Player in 2016 and 2017, and placed on the podium in the subsequent three years.
- He scored at least one hattrick every year from 2010 to 2024. He managed nine in 2011 alone.
- In 2009, he claimed the inaugural FIFA Puskás Award for a sensational long-range strike against Porto in the Champions League.

Swansong of the ultimate RIVALRY

For almost two decades, football has revolved around two names: Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. One captivated the world with his effortless brilliance, turning impossible moments into routine magic. The other built his legacy through relentless determination, transforming talent into an obsession with excellence. Their rivalry transcended clubs, leagues and continents, becoming the defining story of modern football.

STAR SPORTS DESK

Fans chose sides, debates raged across generations, and every goal, trophy, and record became another chapter in a contest that reshaped the sport. Now, as the 2026 FIFA World Cup begins in North America, football prepares for what could be the final act of its greatest rivalry. Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo are set to appear in their sixth World Cups. Twenty years after making their tournament debuts as teenagers in Germany in 2006, they return one last time as global icons whose influence extends far beyond football. For Messi, many believed the story had already reached its perfect ending. In Qatar in 2022, he finally captured the one trophy that had eluded him throughout his extraordinary career. Leading Argentina to World Cup glory, he delivered one of the greatest individual tournament performances ever seen, scoring seven goals and inspiring his nation to a dramatic victory over France in the final. After lifting the trophy in Doha, Messi admitted there was little left to achieve. "I can't ask

for any more," he said. Yet retirement never arrived. Instead, Messi continued writing his story. After leaving PSG, he joined Inter Miami and helped transform football's profile in the United States. He remains a decisive figure for club and country, leading Argentina to another Copa America title in 2024 and finishing as the top scorer in South American World Cup qualifying. Approaching his 39th birthday, Messi is no longer the explosive teenager who dazzled at Barcelona. But his intelligence, vision, and leadership remain as influential as ever. Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni has made it clear that the defending champions still revolve around their captain. Messi enters the tournament with 13 World Cup goals and a record 26 World Cup appearances. He is also closing in on 200 international caps, another remarkable milestone in a career already filled with records. But unlike previous tournaments, Argentina no longer depend entirely on him. Players such as Julian Alvarez, Lautaro Martinez, Enzo Fernandez, Alexis Mac Allister,

Cristian Romero, and Emiliano Martinez have formed a world-class supporting cast. Even so, Messi remains the symbol of Argentina's ambitions as they attempt to defend the trophy. On the other side stands Ronaldo, football's ultimate competitor. At 41 years old, Ronaldo arrives at what he has already confirmed will be his final World Cup. While he has conquered almost every challenge football could offer -- winning league titles across Europe, lifting the Champions League multiple times, claiming five Ballon d'Or awards, and leading Portugal to Euro 2016 glory -- the World Cup remains the missing piece of his legacy. Portugal reached the semifinals in 2006, but Ronaldo has never come closer to the sport's greatest prize. That reality continues to fuel him. Today, Ronaldo remains the most-capped men's international player in history, with 226 appearances, and the leading scorer in men's international football with 143 goals. Despite leaving European football for Saudi Arabian side Al Nassr, he continues to score at a remarkable rate and is

closing in on the unprecedented milestone of 1,000 career goals. His presence, however, remains one of football's biggest debates. Some believe Portugal's talented generation -- featuring Bruno Fernandes, Vitorinha, Joao Neves, and Nuno Mendes -- would play with greater freedom without Ronaldo. Others argue

win. Ronaldo pursues the one achievement that has always escaped him. One legend aims to cement an already complete legacy, while the other searches for a final piece of footballing immortality. There is even the possibility of a dream encounter. If both Argentina and Portugal top their groups and progress

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that his leadership, experience, and winning mentality remain invaluable. Portugal coach Roberto Martinez belongs firmly in the latter camp, insisting that Ronaldo continues to earn his place on merit. The debate may continue, but one fact is undeniable: Portugal arrive in North America as genuine contenders. Messi seeks to defend the crown he fought so hard to

through the knockout rounds, Messi and Ronaldo could meet in a quarterfinal that would captivate the sporting world. Whether that showdown happens or not, the significance of this tournament is clear. For nearly twenty years, the game belonged to Messi and Ronaldo. Now, football prepares to watch them dance one final time.