

The prodigy who refused to wait

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The first thing that stands out about Lamine Yamal is not flair, nor is it raw skill or a penchant for trying the unobvious. It is the calm – an eerie, composed serenity that completely belies his age.

At a time when most teenagers are still asking to leave class early, Yamal is leaving world-class defenders on the floor and everyone else in utter disbelief.

The world first bore collective witness to this unsettling serenity on a sweltering summer evening in Munich. The date is July 10, 2024. Intense hype surrounds the 16-year-old Spain and Barcelona star as he prepares for a Euro 2024 semifinal against a French side that had dominated all before falling to Argentina in the 2022 World Cup final.

Yamal walks into the ground looking like a million dollars. In a packed stadium, the weight of expectations reverberates across the stands and onto the pitch. The pressure is on but Yamal wears it like a crown.

Receiving the ball near the right half-space, he shimmies right, wrongfooting the French backline, before feinting left to bury a magnificent left-footed curler into the top left corner.

He had officially announced his arrival in national colours. That Euro, he played like it belonged to him; he turned 17 years and a day old when he lifted the trophy as the youngest-ever player to win the tournament. Yet, that exquisite curling trajectory was a signature loop he would continuously recreate.

Fast forward to May 7, 2025. Barcelona faced Inter Milan at home in the Champions League semis, falling 2-0 behind within 21 minutes at the Olympic Stadium in what turned out to be a classic affair. Moments like these set up destiny.

Completely unfazed, Yamal shimmies deep into Inter territory, freezing defenders in his wake before producing a clinical, bending effort off the left post to get Barca back on track. Moments later, he draws Federico Dimarco and Henrikh Mkhitaryan to the goal line near the right post,

faking them out entirely to hit the crossbar from an impossible angle, leaving commentators gasping, saying “This is a wonderkid!”.

By the end of a dazzling night, as the tie finished 3-3, he had firmly etched his name into football lore. Inter eventually progressed with a 4-3 win in the second leg, but those curling strikes were mapping out a growing stature and his eagerness to impact matches – an arc Yamal was writing entirely for himself.

Even Lionel Messi had taken notice, noting that the youngster reminded him of his own early years, seemingly anointing him as his successor. Beyond the validation of trophies or sheer numbers, Messi has always belonged to the game’s iconic moments, making his early recognition of Yamal feel like a profound footballing prophecy.

The technical sensitivity is clear; his assists are put on a silver platter and his dribbles bend cognitive reality. The numbers from this past club season back up the hyperbole – a league title defence with Barcelona, crossing the forty mark in goal contributions, proved that his output has finally caught up to his genius. And yet, he navigates it all looking like a child.

Born to a Moroccan father and a mother from Equatorial Guinea, his journey mirrors Messi’s hurdles, culminating in a formative education at La Masia. Yet, their characters diverge sharply. Where Messi remains a minimalist on the pitch and a humble genius off it, Yamal thrives on social media, carving out a massive reputation in the digital sphere.

His mojo is built on vibrant self-expression, channelling a Neymar-esque street flair, complete with the alluring lifestyle of stardom. He dons the legendary Barcelona number 10 shirt as if it were always destiny.

Having spent the gruelling 2025/26 campaign carrying the tactical weight of that iconic jersey, he enters this tournament no longer as a prodigy on trial, but as the established heartbeat of Barcelona.

In a previous era, a teenager might have been told to wait his turn, but Yamal represents a

new archetype of immediate autonomy. “I don’t want to be Messi – and he knows it,” he famously said. The footballing world moves fast; when Ansu Fati arrived at 16, he was heralded as the next best thing, but now finds himself on loan at Monaco.

Ultimately, football has a way of rewarding those who master its deepest nuances. Whenever the ball reaches Yamal’s feet, entire crowds stand up, squinting for a clearer view, captive to the expectation that something extraordinary is about to happen.

A late twist to the tale sees Yamal carrying a lingering injury into the World Cup. After a gruelling near fifty-game club season that saw him pushed to his physical limits, the heavily bandaged ankle he sports in training camps has thrown a shadow of anxiety over Spain’s camp. Diego Maradona in 1990 or Ronaldo Nazario in 2002 famously entered tournaments compromised, yet still willed their teams to the finals.

Yamal, no matter how many World Cups lie ahead, won’t let this opportunity go by, considering Messi got his hands on the trophy so late in the career.

Youngest player ever to get into the ballon d’Or podium and stepping into North America on the back of successive Kopa Trophies, Yamal arrives like a certainty.

The World Cup remains the grandest stage for ultimate expression, and the world eagerly awaits the next shape of Yamal’s rising arc.



Sleepless, sonic summer of '26

EKUSH TAPADER

Will the average fan stay up all night to catch Brazil’s opening match at 4:00 am? Or will they go to bed early and rub the sleep from their eyes to wake up long before dawn?

An even greater challenge awaits just two days later. For a football lover, it is only natural to want to watch France’s opening match at 1:00 am. But by the time that game wraps up, the clock will read 3:00 am. How, then, is one to catch Argentina’s opening fixture at 7:00 am? Many will simply endure a completely sleepless night, entirely consumed by football.

To complicate matters, Portugal plays later that same night. What will the workflow look like the next day? Will the human body even survive this relentless assault? For fans in the subcontinent, the upcoming FIFA World Cup in North America is set to be the ultimate test of physical endurance.

This year, the beautiful game demands a grueling trade-off: sacrificing physical well-being in exchange for absolute footballing loyalty. The vastness of North American time zones has turned the tournament into a brutal matrix for Bangladeshi viewers, even before the opening whistle.

The relatively manageable 11:00 pm BST (Bangladesh Standard Time) kickoff is merely the opening act. The real test of devotion belongs to the dreaded post-midnight and pre-dawn slots where even chronic insomniacs will have a tough time keeping up with the grueling tempo. Local football enthusiasts are certainly used to staying up late for marquee club matches, but the World Cup presents a cluster of fixtures at timings that will pose a massive psychological challenge even for the most seasoned night-owl fans.

This scheduling shift threatens to fundamentally rewrite the traditional social fabric of local football culture. Historically, a World Cup in Bangladesh means a raucous



PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

The domestic landscape, however, adapts in spectacular ways. To accommodate the late-evening and midnight match viewing, the traditional family dinner will undergo a dramatic evolution. Homemakers will increasingly opt to make evening meals far more extravagant, turning the dining table into a pre-match festival of heavy platters and finger foods designed to keep the entire household fueled through the looming graveyard shifts.

Consider the students as well. The festive warmth of the Eid-ul-Adha holidays will barely have faded before the relentless drums of the World Cup begin to beat. Due to strict administrative adjustments, Bangladesh likely does not have a dedicated summer vacation this time. With mid-year academic pressures and back-to-back exams looming, a massive question mark hangs over how deeply the largest and most vibrant segment of football fans can immerse themselves in the tournament. Caught between classroom assignments and their favourite team’s do-or-die battles, their twenty-four hours will stretch into an extraordinary balancing act.

Yet, amid this impending exhaustion lies a strange and primal beauty. While residents in host cities like New York or Los Angeles experience these matches as an effortless evening luxury, for the Bangladeshi fandom, viewership becomes an act of profound physical discipline. Navigating the tropical mornings of June and July with heavy eyelids and dark circles under the eyes will become a badge of honour in this country.

This widespread endurance remains the ultimate indicator of the subcontinent’s distinct football culture. As dawn breaks over Dhaka and millions of sleep-deprived fans head to their workplaces and classrooms, a compelling message is sent to the footballing world: North America may hold the stadium keys, but the tournament’s most vigilant heart remains wide awake in the South Asian dark, powered by unconditional love.

FIFA WORLD CUP 2026

MORE OLDIES THAN EVER
A record eight players aged 40 or older have been selected to play at the tournament – one more than at all the past 22 tournaments combined. The oldest player of all at the 2026 finals will be 43-year-old Scotland goalkeeper Craig Gordon.

PLAYER AND CLUB NUMBERS
1,248 players from 449 clubs in 71 countries. 357 players have previous World Cup experience; 891 are debutants.

MOST PLAYERS BASED IN
England (200), Germany (109), France (86), Spain (86)

CLUBS WITH MOST PLAYERS: Manchester City (19), Bayern Munich (18), Paris Saint-Germain (16), Arsenal (16)

NEW RULES FOR 2026
VAR expanded: Checks wrongly awarded corners. Reviews second-yellow-card dismissals. Can review fouls before set pieces.

NEW RED-CARD OFFENCES
Leaving the field in protest. Covering the mouth during confrontations.

PRE-MATCH CEREMONY
All available players in a team’s squad will gather around the centre circle for the national anthems, with extra-large country flag banners on the pitch behind them.

ANTI-TIME-WASTING MEASURES
5-second countdown for throw-ins and goal kicks. Players must leave the field within 10 seconds when substituted.

INJURY TREATMENT CHANGES
Outfield players treated on the pitch must stay off for 60 seconds.

HYDRATION BREAKS
One 3-minute break in each half.

PRIZE MONEY
Total prize pool: \$655 million (Up from \$440 million at the 2022 World Cup).