

PRESERVING PARADISE

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

On the night of December 18, 2022, Argentine superstar Lionel Messi finally shook hands with paradise. Lifting the most coveted trophy in football, the FIFA World Cup, marked the emotional climax of an illustrious career long scarred by international heartbreak and near-misses. That thrilling penalty-shootout victory over France at the Lusail Stadium completed football for Messi. Having won virtually everything at club level, the world title remained the one prize he craved, having come agonizingly close against Germany in 2014.

Winning it at age 35, many expected it to serve as the perfect curtain-call for his international career. Instead, he chose to continue selectively, opting to enjoy his football with the Albiceleste while wearing the coveted world champions badge on his chest.

His journey toward a record-breaking sixth World Cup appearance has been managed with utmost care. Over the past three seasons with Inter Miami in the US, Messi has adjusted his workload wisely, ensuring physical longevity without diminishing his devastating impact for his country.

He proved his enduring class by guiding Argentina to a second successive Copa America title in 2024 and finishing as top scorer in the South American qualifiers, where Argentina topped the standings.

The final confirmation arrived on May 28 this year, when head coach Lionel Scaloni included the 38-year-old captain, set to turn 39 during the tournament, in his final 26-member squad.

In his previous World Cups, Messi carried the suffocating expectations of a nation desperate to end a long title drought. This time, the atmosphere is completely altered. As Argentina prepares to launch its title defense against Riyadh Mahrez's Algeria -- who enter the tournament high on confidence after beating the Netherlands in a friendly -- the squad appears calm at its training base in Kansas City.



The 2022 triumph has completely lifted the historical burden, allowing the players to approach the tournament with a refreshing sense of freedom and focused maturity. Scaloni has relied heavily on continuity, retaining 17 members of the triumphant roster from Qatar. Alongside Messi, Argentina boasts a lethal attacking unit featuring Julian Alvarez and Lautaro Martinez, now injected with the raw energy of youngsters like Thiago Almada, Nicolas Paz, and Giuliano Simeone.

A midfield anchored by Rodrigo De Paul, Alexis Mac Allister, Enzo Fernandez, and Leandro Paredes provides

elite balance, deeply reinforced by the presence of Giovanni Lo Celso, Exequiel Palacios, and young Valentin Barco.

At the back, a stubborn defensive line consisting of Cristian Romero, Nicolas Otamendi, and Lisandro Martinez shields star shot-stopper Emiliano Martinez, with full support from the likes of Nahuel Molina, Gonzalo Montiel, and Nicolas Tagliafico.

History, however, offers a sharp warning. After their triumphs in 1978 and 1986, Argentina famously lost their respective opening matches at the following editions -- against Belgium in 1982 and Cameroon in 1990. More

recently, they suffered a shock opening defeat to Saudi Arabia in 2022. Scaloni will thus be hyper-aware of this campaign-opener hoodoo and eager to avoid an unwanted repeat against the disciplined North Africans.

The challenge ahead, as ever, remains immense; only Italy (1938) and Brazil (1962) have ever successfully defended a World Cup. Yet with Messi still leading the way, Argentina continue to believe that anything is possible.

Magic and miracles often follow the great No. 10, and the clash against Algeria could be the first step on another awe-inspiring journey.

- Messi is set to become the first player in history to appear at six FIFA World Cups. The 38-year-old has played 26 World Cup matches, the most by any player.
- The eight-time Ballon d'Or winner will also become only the second player, after Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo, to earn 200 international caps.
- This will be the first World Cup meeting between Argentina and Algeria. The Albiceleste won their only previous encounter, a friendly in June 2007, when Messi scored his first international brace in a 4-3

- victory at Barcelona's Camp Nou.
- Argentina will be confident of avoiding an early upset, having progressed beyond the first round in 13 of their last 14 World Cup appearances. The lone exception came in 2002.
- Argentina have won their last

- six World Cup matches against African opposition - five of them against Nigeria - since losing 1-0 to Cameroon in 1990. That defeat was also the last time the Albiceleste failed to score in a World Cup opener.
- Algeria, appearing at their fifth World Cup, will look to striker

- Mohammed Amoura, who topped CAF qualifying with 10 goals in 10 matches. He was directly involved in 58% of Algeria's 24 qualifying goals, contributing four assists as well.
- Algeria have won just one of their last 10 World Cup matches - a 4-2 win over South Korea in 2014 - while

- their two other victories came back in 1982.
- After a 7-0 rout of Guatemala and a goalless draw with Uruguay in March, Algeria beat the Netherlands and Bolivia earlier this month. They have conceded only twice in their last six matches.

A MOMENT OF RESPECT FOR THE DEBUTANTS

After making history as the smallest nation ever to compete at the FIFA World Cup, Curacao endured a tough 7-1 defeat to four-time champions Germany. Yet the most memorable moment came after the final whistle at Houston Stadium in Texas, where both teams gathered together in a joint huddle. A classy tribute to the beautiful game.

PHOTO: X



Nagelsmann wants to keep Germany's train on the move

AGENCIES

Germany announced their arrival at the FIFA World Cup 2026 in emphatic fashion, dismantling Curacao 7-1 in Houston to send an early warning to the rest of the tournament. While tougher tests undoubtedly await Julian Nagelsmann's side, this commanding display offered compelling evidence that the four-time world champions could be genuine contenders once again.

The first reason for optimism lies in Germany's devastating set pieces. Whether from corners or free kicks, they possess multiple aerial threats. Nico Schloterbeck's goal perfectly showcased the meticulous planning behind their routines. After repeatedly targeting the far post, Germany adapted cleverly, with Nathaniel Brown delivering to the near post where Schloterbeck timed his run brilliantly to flick home. The influence of set-piece coach Mads Buttgerit is becoming increasingly evident.

Then there is Manuel Neuer. The veteran goalkeeper endured a quiet evening, unable to prevent Curacao's equaliser after a cruel deflection. Yet at 40 years and 79 days old, Neuer became Germany's oldest international of all time and remains a reassuring presence between the posts. Having already won the World Cup and now approaching the record for most appearances by a goalkeeper at the tournament, Neuer's defining moments may still lie ahead.

Jamal Musiala also answered his

critics in style. Recent scrutiny from the German media appeared only to fuel his determination. The Bayern Munich star rediscovered his trademark flair, weaving through defenders with confidence and scoring his first World Cup goal. A fully firing Musiala elevates Germany's attacking potential considerably.

Equally encouraging was the performance of the revamped midfield partnership of Aleksandar Pavlovic and Felix Nmecha. Rebuilt after EURO 2024, Germany's engine room looked composed and inventive. Their chemistry, built both on and off the pitch, allowed Germany to dictate possession and combine with fluidity. This duo could become the heartbeat of Nagelsmann's evolving side.

Perhaps most impressive, however, was Germany's mentality. Curacao's unexpected equaliser could have unsettled them. Instead, they responded with authority, restoring control before unleashing a relentless second-half assault. Nagelsmann praised both the team's patience and intensity, qualities essential for success in major tournaments.

"We are on the right path," Nagelsmann insisted, while acknowledging that stronger opponents await. Germany know the journey has only begun, but confidence is growing after such an emphatic start. Referring to a song sung by German supporters after the match, the coach added: "The train has no brakes. We will try to do that, to keep going and going in this tournament."

Austria end long exile against debutants Jordan

AGENCIES

Jordan will make their historic first-ever World Cup appearance on Wednesday against a resurgent Austria side ending a 28-year exile from the global stage. The debutants, whose nickname 'Al-Nashama' translates to 'The Chivalrous Ones', enter the tournament riding the crest of a historic golden wave.

Coached by Moroccan Jamal Sellami, Jordan have set no lofty goals for their maiden world stage appearance but have rapidly developed into a regional powerhouse, shockingly reaching both the 2023 Asian Cup and 2025 Arab Cup finals.

The tournament represents a monumental moment back home, where football serves as the ultimate cultural glue. When Al-Nashama play, social and regional differences are cast aside, routinely bringing the streets of Amman to a complete standstill.

However, Jordan must navigate their historic opener without some key figures. Losing dynamic forward Yazan Al-Naimat to a knee injury in December was a bitter blow following his eight goals in qualification, and Sellami has suffered further casualties since,



with defender Mohammad Abu Ghosh a late call up to replace Ibrahim Sabra.

The Chivalrous Ones were beaten 2-0 by Colombia following a 4-1 thumping by

Switzerland in their final warm-up matches. But Sellami remains fiercely upbeat.

"We are proud of the team's presence at the World Cup finals," he told reporters ahead of the match.

"Participating in this global event is a significant opportunity to present a positive image of Jordan on the international stage."

Jordan could catch the returning Europeans at a vulnerable moment. Ralf Rangnick's aggressive pressing system will be missing injured midfield talisman Christoph Baumgartner. His absence forces a heavy reliance on newly recruited youngsters Paul Wanner (20) and Carney Chukwuemeka (22), who only committed to Austria in March.

Despite nursing a serious thigh injury, Baumgartner will remain with the squad as a talismanic figure on the sidelines, much like captain David Alaba did at the Euros when ruled out with a torn knee ligament.

"Rehabilitation is obviously the main focus because I help everyone most by getting fit as quickly as possible," the RB Leipzig midfielder said.

"But beyond that, I'll try to contribute however I can."



A draw on the pitch, a win in spirit

Japan showed their fighting spirit on and off the pitch. Twice coming from behind to earn a thrilling 2-2 draw against the Netherlands, the Samurai Blue never gave up, with Koki Ogawa's late header taking a deflection off Daichi Kamada to secure a deserved point. Yet, the most beautiful moment came after the final whistle, as Japanese fans stayed behind to clean the stands, leaving the stadium spotless. For them, it's more than a gesture -- it's a culture of respect, responsibility and thinking of others; a value learned from childhood.

PHOTO: REUTERS