



PHOTOS: REUTERS

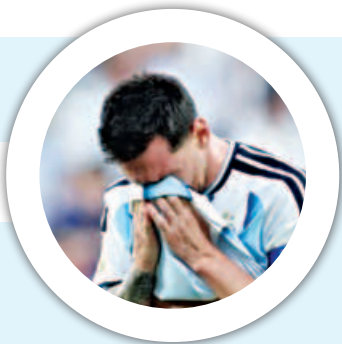
Was there ever any doubt about who would dominate the headlines once eight-time Ballon d’Or winner Lionel Messi’s name appeared on Argentina’s teamsheet? The answer was always a resounding no. And although Algeria fell 3-0 to the defending champions in their Group J opener at the FIFA World Cup, they were at least afforded a front-row seat to greatness. Chasing a second World Cup crown at the age of 38, Messi delivered a masterclass in Kansas City yesterday, producing a stunning hatrick to launch the Albiceleste’s title defence in emphatic fashion and another romantic chapter in Argentina’s World Cup history.

- Messi’s magnificent hatrick in Argentina’s 3-0 win over Algeria saw him draw level with Miroslav Klose’s all-time World Cup scoring record of 16 goals.
- The Argentina captain also matched another Klose milestone, equalling the German’s record of 17 World Cup victories.
- At 38 years and 357 days, Messi became the oldest player to score a World Cup hat-trick, eclipsing Cristiano Ronaldo, who was 33 years and 130 days old when he netted a treble against Spain in 2018. It was also Messi’s first World Cup hat-trick.
- The landmark performance came in Messi’s 200th appearance for Argentina and in his first World Cup match since scoring twice in the iconic 2022 final against France.
- Messi became the first Argentine to score in five consecutive World Cup matches, surpassing Hernan Crespo and Guillermo Stabile, who had each scored in four straight games.
- With two long-range strikes in Kansas City, Messi took his tally of World Cup goals from outside the box to six, breaking the previous record of five held by Brazil legend Rivellino. His earlier long-range World Cup goals came against Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iran and Nigeria in 2014, and Mexico in 2022.
- Messi became the first men’s player to appear at six World Cups when he took the field against Algeria. Cristiano Ronaldo joined him later the same day against DR Congo.
- Messi made his record-breaking



- 26th World Cup appearance in the 2022 final, surpassing Lothar Matthäus, and his 27th in Argentina’s 2026 opener against Algeria. Becoming the first player to reach 30 World Cup appearances is now within reach.
- Messi has captained a side in a record 20 World Cup matches. Rafa Márquez (17) and Diego Maradona (16) are next on the list.
- He holds the record for the most minutes played in World Cup history (2,404), having surpassed Paolo Maldini’s mark of 2,217 minutes in the 2022 final.
- Messi is the only player to register an assist at five different World Cups. His closest challengers -- Pele, Grzegorz Lato, Diego Maradona and David Beckham -- recorded assists in three editions each.
- Messi and Pele share the record for the most knockout-stage assists in World Cup history (six) and jointly hold the record for the most goal contributions (21).
- Messi is the only player to score at the World Cup in his teens, 20s and 30s. Pele fell just four months short of achieving the same feat.
- Messi’s first and most recent World Cup goals were scored exactly 20 years apart, another tournament record. The next-longest span belongs to Cristiano Ronaldo at 16 years and 160 days.
- Since the award was introduced in 2002, Messi has won the Player of the Match accolade a record 12 times. His four awards at Brazil 2014 are also a single-edition record, shared with Wesley Sneijder from South Africa 2010.

WHAT THEY SAID



Why did I cry? It was something completely unrelated to football. I went through some difficult days, but I’m grateful to the entire delegation and my teammates because they were always by my side, giving me a lot of strength to help me get through it. I’m very happy and grateful for this wonderful group, I enjoy it so much.

LIONEL MESSI

There are no words to describe him. If anyone thought this team was better without Leo, today it was proven that the opposite is true. He is our most important player. We need to build a team around him, and we are doing it.

Argentina midfielder **Alexis Mac Allister**

It’s not about imagining [if he could have a start like this.] He’s been doing this for 20 years. People who watch football want to see him; it’s not just Argentines. Beyond the result, we have to enjoy him. What he transmits to the world is incredible.

Argentina coach **Lionel Scaloni**

Class is permanent. He’s fortunate to have the privilege that the entire Argentina team works for him, and supports him, and for a number of years now, decades, he’s done incredible things.

Algeria coach **Vladimir Petkovic**

We said before the game that this guy (Messi) and the guy we are going to see tomorrow (Ronaldo) are both on the moon. He reminded us why he is who he is and Argentina also reminded us why they are the holders and let’s not forget about them. But Leo is just different.

Former France forward **Thierry Henry**

I don’t believe we will get another Messi, because he’s special. He’s natural. It’s like the game was built for him. Everything he touches becomes gold. And he has a team that is ready to die for him. Him winning another World Cup will not change his status as the greatest. It’s just another trophy in the trophy room.

Former Sweden striker **Zlatan Ibrahimovic**

A never-seen-before race

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

Before the start of the 2026 FIFA World Cup, one of the most anticipated storylines was the race to break Germany striker Miroslav Klose’s all-time World Cup goalscoring record. Within the first week, that race has already begun to shape into one of its defining narratives. With Lionel Messi now equalling Klose’s mark of 16 goals and Kylian Mbappe just two behind, this is the first time the World Cup has featured two contenders for the all-time scoring record competing simultaneously. Klose scored his 16 goals across four World Cups between 2002 and 2014, surpassing Brazilian legend Ronaldo Nazario’s tally of 15. By the end of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, it already seemed only a matter of time before the record would fall. Argentina captain Messi and France star Mbappe finished that tournament with seven and eight goals respectively, taking their overall

World Cup tallies to 13 and 12, bringing both within touching distance of Klose’s landmark. Even Klose himself admitted he expects his record to be broken during this tournament, pointing to the expanded 48-team format as a factor that gives elite forwards more opportunities to score. “With more teams, there are more matches and therefore more opportunities to score goals...the record will be broken eventually anyway. Messi is welcome to do it. I’m a huge Messi fan and always have been.” At 27, Mbappe entered the tournament as the overwhelming favourite to surpass the record. Having already scored 12 World Cup goals across just two editions, his age suggests he could feature in at least two more tournaments beyond 2026, making the record appear, if not inevitable, then increasingly within reach. For Messi, however, the path looked far more uncertain. Following Argentina’s triumph in Qatar, another World Cup

appearance seemed unlikely. Yet it was the 38-year-old who got their first, levelling Klose’s record with a scintillating hatrick in Argentina’s opener against Algeria in Kansas City on Wednesday. Mbappe, however, had moved closer first, scoring twice in France’s 3-1 victory over Senegal in their Group I opener in New Jersey yesterday. His brace took his World Cup tally to 14 goals in just 15 matches. Hours later, Messi answered in spectacular fashion, netting his first World Cup hatrick to join Klose at the summit of the all-time scoring chart. Despite the milestone, Messi downplayed its significance. “To enjoy this with my family, with my teammates, the ones who are always there, is a really beautiful moment,” Messi said after the match. “I’m happy.” He added: “It’s an honour to be there, given what it means to stand alongside Klose and others. “Ronaldo is there too, but I don’t

think it means anything. Mbappe as well, who scored two today. “In the end, it’s just a statistic and nothing more.” The battle many expected before the tournament has already burst into life in thrilling fashion. With France set to face Iraq and Norway in their remaining group-stage matches, and Argentina taking on Austria and Jordan, both Messi and Mbappe will back themselves to add further goals before the knockout rounds. Whether it is Messi or Mbappe who ultimately claims the record outright remains to be seen, but for now, football fans can enjoy a historic race unfolding on the sport’s grandest stage.



PHOTO: REUTERS

“There are still people out there who will criticise him but he is an extraordinary player. Not everything came off for him, but he can win games in one moment.”

France coach **Didier Deschamps**