



ETERNAL KID

at the peak of destiny

KHALID HOSSAIN

For elite athletes, the age of 27 is the absolute zenith, the perfect intersection of physical peak and tactical maturity. Lionel Andres Messi reached this milestone in 2014, yet that year ended in the agonising heartbreak of a lost World Cup final at the final hurdle.

For most people, entering the wrong side of the 30s signals the dawn of compromise, a slow capitulation to fading reflexes and physical decay.

To look at Messi now is to understand a profound transformation. He has undergone the classic literary evolution of Tolkien’s archetype, transitioning from Gandalf the Grey to

it was a preservation.

Freed from the gruelling, hyper-intense demands of Spanish club seasons, his subsequent chapters in Paris and Miami allowed him to conserve his body and soul. He was born anew, specifically for the Albiceleste. Within this phase, manager Lionel Scaloni built a sanctuary.

Messi’s late-career statistics subvert standard athletic logic, with a staggering 12 of his 18 World Cup goals coming after turning 35. It is a distillation of pure awareness.

Before his side’s match against Austria in the ongoing FIFA World Cup, the opposition coach Ralf Rangnick noted that Messi “walks,” stands in

are limited. But if you function out of your awareness, your presence becomes completely different.”

Messi has traded the frantic velocity of his youth for supreme spatial perception. As his childhood idol Pablo Aimar and Scaloni’s trusty assistant, once beautifully noted, “The last Messi is always the best Messi.” What critics once mislabelled as laziness is actually supreme mastery. He walks because he sees everything first, conserving his energy for the exact micro-second that matters.

In December 2007, his mother, Celia, recalled his childhood: “We used to play cards and no one wanted to play with him because we knew that sooner or later he would cheat... He was like a prince among his friends, a leader for how he managed the ball. He shone.”

And decades later, that mischievous prince remains. He plays with the singular, pure focus of a child with a ball at his feet, bringing an ethereal beauty and grace back to a hyper-mechanised sport.

For generations, football hunted for ‘the next Maradona’ – a crushing label Messi himself had to outgrow. Today, the world hunts for ‘the next Messi.’ Yet, given the sheer scale of what he has achieved and the poetic manner of his execution, one can only wonder at the terrifying weight of expectation that awaits the next next Messi.

With every touch, every effortless drift into space, and every drop of stardust he leaves on the pitch, the world approaches the final, lingering notes of a beautiful symphony.

Today, on June 24, as he turns 39, the eternal child simply keeps playing, until the time comes to finally board the ship, leave the shores of Middle-earth, and sail away to the Undying Lands of the Elves.

“I just want Messi to be happy – that’s what we all want.”

Argentina coach **LIONEL SCALONI**



Gandalf the White.

The pre-2022 Messi was the grey wanderer – a battle-scarred warrior carrying the crushing weight of a nation’s history, perpetually wrestling with the fiery Balrogs of existential pressure and institutional anxiety.

In Qatar, though, he plummeted into the competitive abyss, only to emerge entirely transfigured. The weathered cloak of generational burden was left behind, replaced by a radiant, unburdened purity.

In life, unexpected upheavals are frequently the precise disruptions required to break a rigid cycle. When Barcelona parted ways with him, it felt like an eviction from Eden. In hindsight,

offside positions, and exempts himself from counter-pressing. And yesterday, the script was intensely human. He dragged a penalty wide, feeling the sharp, familiar fury of his own fallibility.

By the 95th minute, however, the maestro cleaned up the mess with two trademark flashes of his left foot, becoming the tournament’s all-time top scorer – an early birthday present delivered by a man who has mastered the ultimate spiritual art: constantly shedding old identities to recreate himself. Rangnick’s plan failed because Messi’s stillness is predatory.

There is a timeless eastern wisdom that dictates: “If you function only with your physical body, your capabilities

LIONEL MESSI PROFILE

Full name: Lionel Andres Messi
Date of birth: June 24, 1987
Place of birth: Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina
Height: 1.70 m (5 ft 7 in)
Position: Forward
Family
Father’s name: Jorge Horacio Messi
Mother’s name: Celia Maria Cuccittini
Spouse’s name: Antonella Rocuzzo (married in 2017)
Children: Mateo, Thiago and Ciro (3 sons)
Clubs (Senior career)

Inter Miami CF (Jul 2023 - now)
Matches: 104
Goals: 90
Paris Saint-Germain (Aug 2021 - Jun 2023)
Matches: 75
Goals: 32
Barcelona (Jul 2004 - Jun 2021)
Matches: 778
Goals: 672
National team
Argentina (Jan 2005 - now)
Matches: 201
Goals: 122

Trophies
Barcelona: Champions League (4), LaLiga (10), Copa del Rey (7), Club World Cup (3), European Super Cup (3), Supercopa de Espana (8)
Paris Saint-Germain: Ligue 1 (2), Trophée des Champions (1)
Inter Miami: Leagues Cup (1), Supporters Shield (1), MLS (1), Eastern Conference (1)
Argentina: Copa America (2), U-20 World Cup (1), Olympic Games Gold Medal (1), FIFA World Cup (1), Finalissima (1)
Individual Honours
Ballon d’Or (8), The Best Award (3), European

Golden Shoe (6), Laureus World Sports Awards (2), Pichichi LaLiga (8), MVP LaLiga (9), Champions League top scorer (6), World Cup Golden Ball (2), MVP Copa America (2)
Records
All-time top scorer at same club
FC Barcelona all-time top goalscorer
All-time top goalscorer in LaLiga
Top goalscorer in El Clasico
Guinness World Record as top goalscorer for club (91 goals)
All-time top scorer of national teams in South America
Most goals in a LaLiga season (50 goals)

All-time top goalscorer in the Champions League with the same team
Most games played with Argentina in its history
Argentinian with most honours
Argentina’s all-time leading goalscorer
All-time highest goalscorer in the WC
All-time highest appearances in the World Cup
Joint most tournament appearances in the World Cup
All-time player of the match awards in the World Cup

**Updated until June 23, 2026*



Vikings sail into knockouts in style

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It took Norway 28 years to return to football’s greatest stage, but they are doing things in style with a commanding performance in their 3-2 World Cup victory over Senegal on Tuesday.

The team - who won all eight of their European qualifiers - continue to impress, with a quick attacking side led by striker Erling Haaland and inspired playmaker Martin Ødegaard.

“It was a fantastic football match. This is an advertisement for football,” coach Stale Solbakken told national broadcaster NRK after match at the New York/New Jersey stadium.

The victory follows a 4-1 win over Iraq in their opener and takes Norway through to the knockout stage.

Thousands of Norwegian supporters occupied the whole central area behind one of the goals in the stadium, performing their famous imitation of rowers in a Viking longboat. Haaland, apparently emboldened by the vibe from the stands, sailed around Senegal’s

- Having missed 12 consecutive major international tournaments since Euro 2000, Norway’s ‘golden generation’ has officially guided the nation back into the World Cup knockout rounds for the first time since France ‘98.
- To mark the milestone, thousands of travelling supporters performed the iconic “Viking Row” celebration in the stands, with skipper Martin Ødegaard commanding a drum on the pitch as the entire playing squad sat down to join the rhythmic simulation.

defence to score twice and keep himself in the race to win the World Cup Golden Boot. The Norwegian players joined the supporters after the final whistle, performing the rowing ritual on the pitch.

“It is bloody brilliant,” said striker Alexander Sorloth. “Today I am almost a bit moved.”

“We played against Senegal, who are a fantastic team, and I think we were better than them. It’s an insane feeling,” he said.

“It’s emotional. It’s a big achievement for all of us. I’m really happy that we have gone through the group,” Marcus Holmgren Pedersen said after the match.

Defender Leo Ostigard added: “We know that we are a good team and have a lot of quality. That was our target, to get six points. We’re very happy.”

Holmgren Pedersen fittingly had the final word: “It’s amazing. So many people have come over here from Norway to support us, to cheer us on. The enthusiasm of our fans is unbelievable. We’re really happy for them. It feels as though this is a really special moment for Norway.”

Bad weather hits the World Cup

AGENCIES

Fans at the 2026 World Cup in North America had been warned there was a possibility that games could be disrupted by bad weather. On Monday, that likelihood came true with a vengeance as lightning flashed across the sky above Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia and torrential rain soaked spectators at France’s game against Iraq, forcing play to be halted for more than two hours. It was the first time that a match at the tournament has had to be paused due to the weather.

Antoine Chouraqui, a Frenchman who has lived in the United States for a decade, took the development in stride. “There are storms in the summer here. I’ve never had to evacuate a stadium, but I play tennis and often we’re in the middle of a match when the alarm goes off warning that lightning is coming, and we have to leave the court,” he told AFP. The Club World Cup in the United States last year, which served as a dress rehearsal for the World Cup, saw six matches delayed because of extreme weather conditions, including eventual winners Chelsea’s game against Benfica in the round of 16 in Charlotte, which was halted for four and a half hours.

Scientists say this is a phenomenon that could become increasingly common as greenhouse gases continue to warm the planet.

