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SPORT



Time is inevitable, and here we are, trying to find words to write the end of a cycle. Not the end of the story. Because there are stories that, when they become eternal, no longer have an end.

AFA president **CLAUDIO TAPIA** on Messi.



A LIFETIME IN 90 MINUTES

- Messi finished with 126 international goals in 208 appearances for Argentina, averaging 0.61 goals per game. He is second only to Cristiano Ronaldo (146) on the all-time international scoring list.
- Most-capped Argentine player, finishing 61 appearances ahead of Javier Mascherano (147).
- Argentina's all-time leading scorer, with 70 more goals than Gabriel Batistuta (56).
- 21 World Cup goals, the most by an Argentine player, ahead of Gabriel Batistuta (10), Guillermo Stabile (8) and Diego Maradona (8). Messi is second only to Kylian Mbappe (22) on the all-time World Cup scoring list.
- With 12 assists, Messi holds the record for most goal contributions (33) in World Cup history.
- 34 World Cup appearances, the most by any player. Among Argentines, Diego Maradona (21) and Javier Mascherano (20) come next.
- Won three major international titles with Argentina -- the 2021 and 2024 Copa America, the 2022 World Cup and the 2022 Finalissima.
- Made his Argentina debut against Hungary on August 17, 2005, before ending his international career against Benin more than two decades later.

PHOTOS: **AFP**/**REUTERS**

TANVIR AHMED PRANTO

For a few seconds yesterday, Lionel Messi stood still. The Argentine anthem echoed around the Monumental, his three sons beside him, family watching from the stands and 85,000 people singing for a man who had given them so much to sing about. Visibly emotional, Messi looked towards the pitch, taking in a lifetime of memories before stepping into the final 90 minutes of his Argentina career.

Then the ball moved, and somehow, he was still Messi.

At 39, in his 208th and final appearance, he played the full match against Benin, assisting Nicolas Otamendi for the opener, setting up Nico Paz for the second and scoring the third from the penalty spot. Argentina won 3-0, Messi took his international tally to 126, and even on a night built around goodbye, he looked completely at home in the blue and white.

For almost half his life, Messi had been a constant for Argentina. His story had brought heartbreak and criticism, then triumph and glory. On Wednesday night, those two sides seemed to meet: the tears before kick-off and the football once the game began, followed by the gratitude after the final whistle.

The journey was anything but simple.

At 18, Messi inherited expectations that had little to do with the player he was and everything to do with the legends who came before him. Argentina had Alfredo Di Stefano and Diego Maradona. Messi was expected to follow them, and every failure was measured against a standard that seemed impossible at the time.

He was left on the bench during the 2006 World Cup quarter-final against Germany, watched a gifted generation fall apart in 2010 and then lost the 2014 World Cup final and the Copa America finals of 2015 and 2016. At the 2011 Copa America, he was booed in Santa Fe, in his own province. After the 2016 defeat to Chile, he walked away from international football.



There were years when Argentina seemed determined to ask why Messi could not be the player they wanted instead of appreciating the one they had. Yet he kept coming back.

Under Lionel Scaloni, the relationship began to change. The 2019 Copa offered hope; the 2021 Copa brought release as Messi finally won a major international title, beating Brazil at the Maracana. Then came the Finalissima, Qatar 2022 and another Copa in 2024. The player who had once been questioned became the captain who brought Argentina the World Cup.

By the time Argentina celebrated in Buenos Aires after Qatar, around five or six million people had poured into the streets. The country had gone from criticising Messi to embracing him with almost unimaginable force.

During the 2022 World Cup final, while his brothers celebrated wildly after Argentina's goals, Thiago was more restrained. He knew what his father had endured. At six, he had once asked Messi why people in Argentina wanted to kill him. Messi had no easy answer after losing final after final for his country. At the Monumental, he no longer needed one. Thiago stood beside his father while the stadium sang his name.

After the final whistle, Messi said leaving Argentina would hurt, but he was going with peace. He thanked his teammates for helping fulfil his childhood dream of becoming world champion, thanked the supporters and remembered his father Jorge, who died only two months earlier. There was no bitterness in his farewell, only gratitude for a story that had finally reached its end.

The match was an exhibition against Benin, but nobody inside the Monumental was there simply to watch a friendly. A giant Argentina shirt lay across the pitch, Messi's № 10 on the back and one word where his name should have been: Gracias.

Argentina took a remarkably long time to understand the gift it had been given. On Wednesday, with tears in his eyes, peace in his heart and his family beside him, Messi walked away knowing that, finally, his country understood.

The tears before kick-off belonged to the Messi Argentina had known until 2016. The boy who arrived carrying impossible expectations, the player who lost finals and was told he was never quite enough. The peace after the final whistle belonged to the Messi who returned, stayed, won and finally saw the sun begin to shine over his relationship with his country.

Nico Paz and the impossible task

STAR SPORTS DESK

The idea of replacing Lionel Messi, at least figuratively, naturally pops up after the 39-year-old hung up his boots from international football following Argentina's 3-0 win over Benin in a friendly at the Estadio Monumental yesterday.

Messi is arguably the greatest footballer to have graced the game, making the prospect of replacing him seem almost impossible. But, like everything else, life must go on. The baton, however indispensable a player may be to a side, must eventually be passed. Someone has to assume the mantle, even if they don't want to.

Naturally, Nico Paz has been tipped to take the torch and is the leading candidate among Alexis Mac Allister and Franco



Mastantuono for Messi's №10 shirt and the burden of scoring as well as playmaking that comes with it.

This FIFA window, the longest ever, has also helped Paz make his case. He has scored in each of Argentina's three friendlies, including Messi's farewell against Benin, where he scored the third goal from a Messi assist. It was his fourth goal for the Albiceleste.

Paz, who has 14 caps for Argentina, came on as a substitute and immediately combined with Messi on the right flank before curling a left-footed strike into the far corner -- a finish Messi would have had no hesitation acknowledging.

The 22-year-old certainly fits the profile Argentina may need. An elegant, left-footed playmaker who operates in the half-spaces, Paz possesses the guile of a № 10, while his 6'1" frame gives him a height and power advantage, along with the physicality and athleticism to dominate that area of the pitch.

While fans will inevitably look for similarities to Messi, Paz offers a very different physical package that could adapt well to the demands of modern football.

Argentina could also get more defensive work rate. Unlike late-career Messi, who naturally conserved energy out of possession, Paz presses, tracks back and tackles, giving Lionel Scaloni's midfield greater structural solidity without sacrificing creativity.

Rather than trying to be Messi, Paz can take the baton by becoming Argentina's hybrid engine, combining final-third vision with physical power. But expecting him to replace Messi rather than become himself would be unfair. Few, if any, can replicate what Messi has done.

'If all goes well, I'll continue'

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Lionel Scaloni hinted that he will remain in charge of Argentina as the reigning world champions prepare for life without Lionel Messi following their 3-0 victory over Benin at the Monumental Stadium yesterday.

Scaloni's current contract expires in December, with the Argentine Football Association (AFA) keen to extend his deal for another World Cup cycle.

"If all goes well, I'll continue coaching, and the legacy Messi leaves behind is incredible. That's what I'll take away from it. There will never be anything like it on the pitch, and we are eternally grateful to him," Scaloni said.

Asked about his future, he added briefly: "There are still no updates."

Since taking charge in 2018, Scaloni has led the Albiceleste in 104 matches, registering 80 wins, 10 losses and 14 draws -- a win percentage of almost 77 percent, the highest among Argentina coaches. He ended Argentina's trophy drought by winning the 2021 Copa America, then clinched the 2022 World Cup in Qatar and the Finalissima that same year, before adding the 2024 Copa America. The 48-year-old is the only Argentina coach to have won both the World Cup and the Copa America, making him the country's most successful coach.



Enzo's tearful tribute

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Enzo Fernandez struggled to hold back his tears as Lionel Messi addressed thousands of Argentina supporters at the Monumental following their 3-0 victory over Benin.

For Fernandez, Messi's farewell was more than the end of another international appearance. It marked the departure of the player he had admired since childhood and once dreamed of playing alongside.

That dream began when Fernandez was 15. In 2016, when Messi briefly stepped away from international football, Fernandez wondered whether he would ever get the chance to share a pitch with his idol. He even calculated their respective ages and how much time he might have to reach the senior team before Messi's international career ended.

The prospect seemed remote at the time. Messi returned, however, and Fernandez eventually made it to the Argentina team. The two went on to train together, share dressing rooms and celebrate major victories, including Argentina's 2022 World Cup triumph.



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Fernandez has often spoken about how Messi treated him when he joined the national team, something that made their relationship particularly meaningful to him.

"I will always be grateful for how you treated me from the moment I arrived," Fernandez had written on social media after Messi had announced his retirement in August. "I came here with the hope of sharing the pitch with my idol, and instead I found someone who, from the very first moment, made me feel like one of the team."

While speaking to local media after the Benin match, Fernandez acknowledged the significance of the night.

"A very emotional day, to be honest, a lot of mixed feelings. I hope Leo enjoyed it. We're going to miss him a lot," he said.