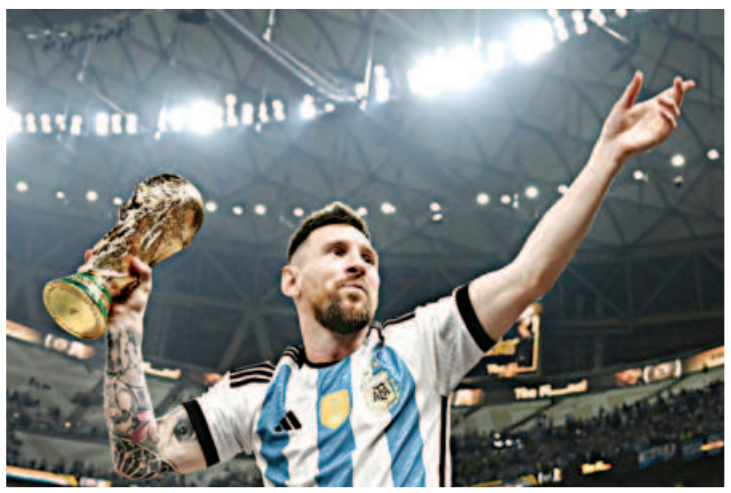


REFLECTIONS



PHOTOS: AFP

TO MESSI, FROM BANGLADESH

TAMJIDUL HOQUE

As the video footages from Buenos Aires emerged on social media, showing Messi arriving at the stadium in tears and waving to his fans, it did not feel like just a farewell match. Instead, it felt like the end of a chapter. Not just a chapter of Lionel Andrés "Leo" Messi's decorated footballing career, but more like a chapter for every football fan who loved Messi and has been part of his journey. It's a bittersweet feeling. It was an absolute privilege to experience this journey, but also a heartache knowing that, like all beautiful things, it has come to an end.

As fan of Argentina from Bangladesh, one question I always faced from people abroad and from people in Argentina is why does a country, thousands of miles away in another continent, revere Messi and Argentina so much? It won't be wrong to say that a large part of Bangladesh celebrates Argentina's success as its own. This is something many people in Argentina and outside Bangladesh couldn't get their heads around. However, for me, the answer was simple and obvious.

It starts with watching a guy kicking a ball around in ways you didn't know was possible. Whether it's dribbling past an entire team while the commentator shouts "Encara Messi!" or placing a free kick with so much precision that it's almost impossible for the goalkeeper to reach the ball. Messi has not only done things that left every football fan speechless. He has done it week in and week out, year after year. What he did on the pitch was entertaining and also awe-inspiring.

Bangladeshis found joy in every dribble, every body feint, and every time Messi charged at the defenders with sheer skill and confidence. Messi's feat with the ball was an escape for every Bangladeshi spectator. It brought joy as well as people together. It was a reason to have a good time. Nowhere was this devotion more electric than when Messi came to play a friendly in Dhaka, uniting an entire nation in a feverish, collective rush to watch greatness unfold.

The Messi story, of course, wasn't always sunshine and rainbows. It had its downs as well. As a fan, I saw how a man of Messi's talent also had to face failure regardless of how hard he tried. While his time with FC Barcelona was almost entirely spectacular, his time with the Argentine national team remained in limbo for a while. He came back empty handed from multiple tournaments, was one step away from winning the World Cup, and even lost multiple Copa America titles.

Messi was made fun of and criticised, regardless of how well he played, because he couldn't win anything for Argentina. Every Messi fan is familiar with this journey, and how it almost reached an abrupt end. We could have been left asking "what could have been" instead of actually experiencing what happened when Messi announced his retirement from the national team in 2016.

However, we all know what happened later.

The footballing gods knew better than to leave Messi without national team glory. The pieces started to fall in place eventually and luck seemed to start falling in Messi's favour after all this time. An example of this can be found when Bernd Leno got injured during a Premier League game which led to the breakout of Emiliano Martínez who played an influential role as Messi finally went on to win the Copa America and the FIFA World Cup. After witnessing all the failures, those who stuck by Messi also got to experience the success.

Messi's victory felt like our own. When he lifted the trophy, the pure, unbridled joy became ours, uniting us in a moment of sheer ecstasy. That shared passion was captured perfectly in the viral video of Daffodil International University students erupting in celebration after Messi's iconic goal against Mexico in the 2022 World Cup – a testament to how deeply his journey touched our hearts.

Every fan has a different view of Messi. For me, my view on him changed over the years.

From getting to know him when I was at the age of six to now, I realised that Messi, for me, is more than what he did on the pitch. He was not just an icon, an entertainer, or an inspiration. To me, Messi is a profound life lesson. He is living proof that talent and capability don't make the road any easier. You will still face many hurdles, ones that feel crushing. But more importantly, he showed the world that no matter how many times you fall, your ultimate goal is waiting for you at the end, as long as you refuse to stop trying.

It was surreal watching Messi give his farewell speech, while thinking about all that led to this moment. The world will move on, like it always does. However, Messi is one name the history books will always remember, and a name that will have a special place in the heart of every Messi (and perhaps every football) fan in Bangladesh.

From Bangladesh, I would like to say to Messi: thank you, for everything.

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