**2021 flashback: Lionel Messi and beautiful madness**

August did not augur well for [Lionel Messi](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Lionel-Messi). It was a month [Messi](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Messi) and his family will never forget. They were on a holiday in Ibiza when a private plane brought them to the Catalonian capital [Barcelona](https://www.happytrips.com/topic/Barcelona) to put ink on paper. Messi's 21-year long stay - where he grew up from a boy to a man to a champion of rare excellence - was supposed to be extended.  
It was not to be. The club and Messi, even though unwilling to part ways, could not meet the demands of the salary cap.

"Despite FC Barcelona and Lionel Messi having reached an agreement and the clear intention of both parties to sign a new contract today, this cannot happen because of Spanish La Liga regulations on player registrations," a Barcelona statement said. Across the globe, it made headlines.



An emotional Messi had to leave Barcelona. Paris Saint-Germain, the only club which enjoys the financial clout, admitted Messi in its fold.  
No one had an inkling that the year would take such a dramatic turn for Messi. A month before, in July, Messi realized his long-cherished dream. Under the pandemic cloud, Messi helped Argentina win their 15th Copa America title, ending an excruciating 28-year wait. Though he did not score in the final, where Angel  
Di Maria's goal knocked Brazil off the perch, Messi completed the tournament as its highest scorer (4) and provider of highest assists with five.  
"What a beautiful madness!" Messi said in an Instagram post showing him shirtless holding the Copa America trophy in the [Maracana](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Maracana)'s dressing room. "This is unbelievable! Thank you, God! We are the champions!"  
Cynics had always found a convenient bullet to fire at the Argentina captain to hurt him while comparing him with [Diego Maradona](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/diego-maradona). In every debate, Messi was accused of failure in the Albiceleste shirt. Not anymore. He lifted the trophy at the same venue, the Maracana, where seven years ago, he ruefully walked past the World Cup.  
The 34-year-old was awarded the player of the match award four times during Copa America 2021, a record for a single edition. Messi has been player of the match 14 times in Copa America history, which is also a record.  
The Argentine, who has played more Copa America matches than any other player, holds the record for most assists in tournament history along with most free-kicks scored. With the Nemean lion killed, Messi landed in Paris on August 11 to a hero's welcome. His hand-waving photo in a white t-shirt - on which was printed "This is Paris" - was splashed all across the globe.  
Reaching Paris, Messi was slow to warm up. Teaming up with [Neymar](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/neymar), friend from his Barcelona days, and the irrepressible [Kylian Mbappe](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Kylian-Mbappe), Messi found his mojo soon enough. His stunning strike against Manchester City in the Champions League has been awarded the best goal in the group stage.  
Come November, the month of awards and accolades, Messi capped a topsy-turvy year with his seventh Ballon d'Or, edging past a highly-deserving Robert Lewandowski and Jorginho. The Brazil-born Italian helped Chelsea win the Champions League and also fashioned Italy's Euro 2020 triumph.  
"It's incredible to be here again," Messi said. "Two years ago, I thought it was the last time. Winning the Copa America was the key. I don't know how many years I have left (to play). But I hope many more," he said at Theatre du Chatelet in Paris.  
Cristiano [Ronaldo](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/Ronaldo), with five Ballon d'Or, skipped the event but did not refrain from stoking a controversy calling France Football's editor in chief, Pascal  
Ferre, a liar. Having switched to his old club Manchester United, Ronaldo is having a tough time. At 36, it is unlikely he will be able to catch up with Messi in the Ballon d'Or bragging rights. Even Portugal's World Cup qualification is at grave risk. The storied rivalry that held its charm for more than a decade,  
seems to have run its course.  
The start of the second year of the pandemic crazy world was by no means smooth for Messi either. Barcelona lost the title to Atletico and were eliminated in  
the Champions League pre-quarterfinals. Not all was going well in his favourite club.  
But winning the Copa America at the Maracana eased the troubled Argentinian's soul. Blaugrana shirt is a distant memory now.