

The impact of Lionel Messi during the 2018 FIFA World Cup

One of the most capped players in World Cup history [1], Lionel Messi has been a staple in the Argentinian national team since the 2010 World Cup [2]. In the recent World Cups, Messi has been seen as one of the deciding factors of a successful tournament for Argentina due to his level of skill and accomplishments in his club career [2]. By watching Lionel Messi play in the 2018 World Cup, I found him to be at the center of all things Argentinian and the focal point in their offense. This was something I reflected on particularly in their final game of the tournament, the round of 16 match against France, where Messi had two assists and was also close to scoring.

Further inspection of play by play data¹ during the 2018 FIFA World Cup highlights that, despite an early exit at the hands of future champions France, Messi was highly involved in Argentina's offense and the goals they subsequently scored during the tournament and, in particular, the match against France. In Figure 1, it can be noted the impact Messi had on Argentina's goals during the match, which totaled three in number, of which two involved Messi directly. The only goal² scored by Argentina without direct involvement from Messi was the goal by Angel Di Maria.

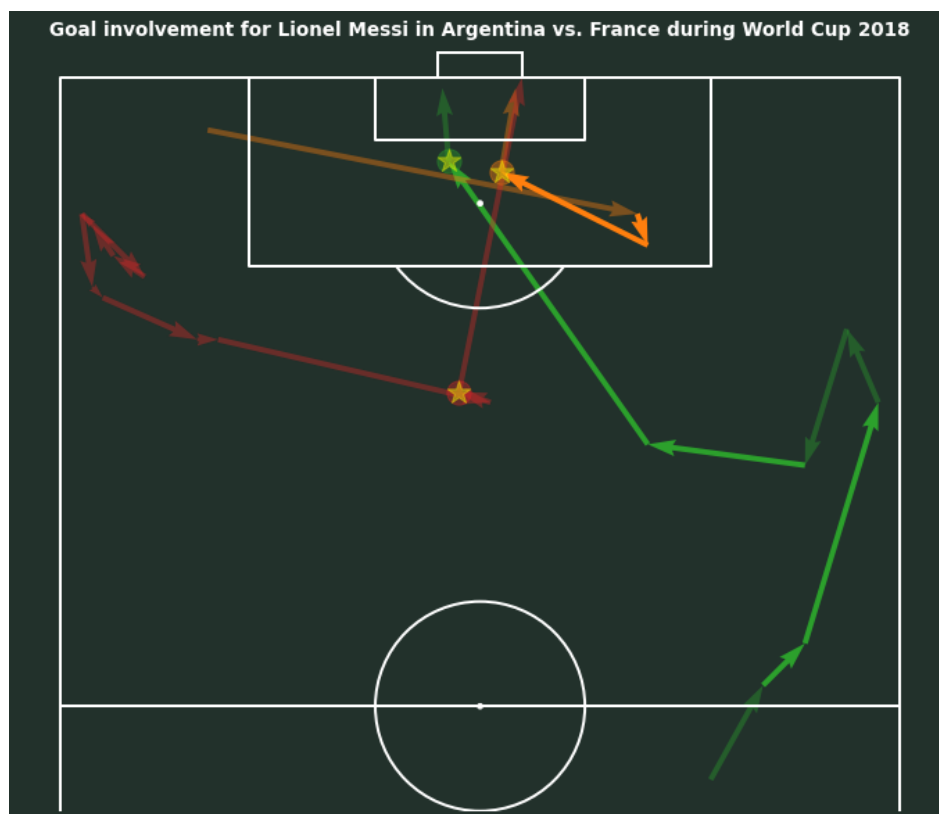


Figure 1: Argentina’s possessions against France leading to a goal scored. Each color represents a possession and highlighted colors indicate direct involvement from Lionel Messi, whereas transparent colors indicate another player was involved. Stars indicate the goal-scoring shot while arrows represent the actions leading to the goal.

Based on Figure 1, where the highlighted lines and symbols indicated actions directly performed by Messi, his impact on the possessions ending with a goal appear substantial since he participates either in the build-up or taking the final shot in the possession. When it comes to taking the final shot against France, Argentina frequently looked to

¹Provided by Statsbomb. Available at github.com/statsbomb/open-data

²This also applies for the entire tournament, since Messi was directly involved in five of the six goals scored by Argentina.

Messi as he took the most shots (4) by any Argentinian, tightly followed by Angel Di Maria (3) and Sergio Agüero (2). However, not all possessions end in a goal, and it is also worth examining how involved Messi is within a short time period, say 15 seconds, prior to a shot being taken by his team.

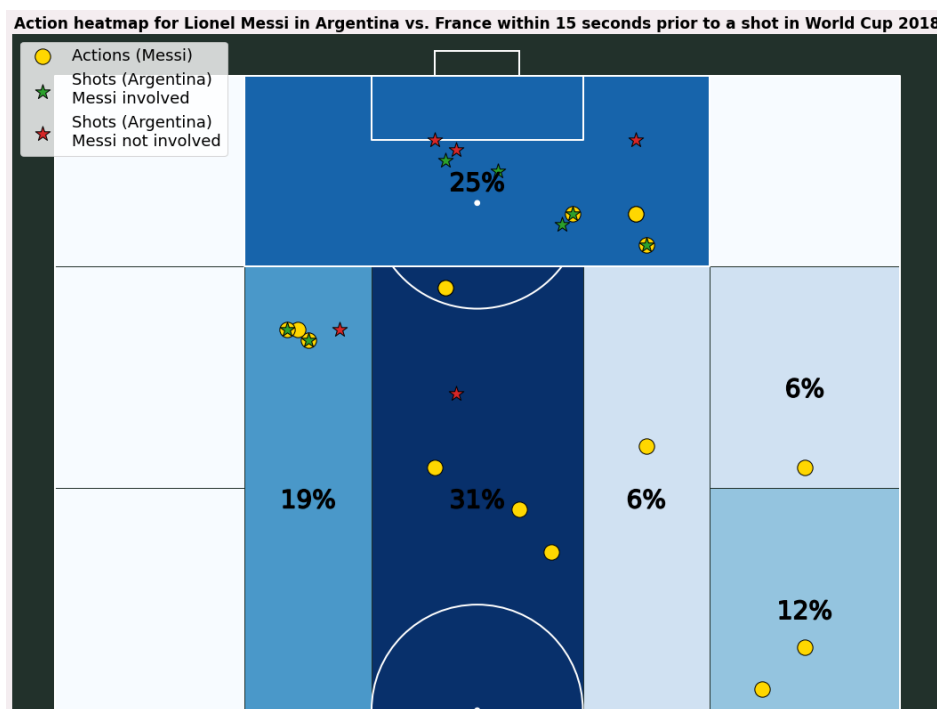


Figure 2: Involvement of Lionel Messi in the Argentinian offense during the 2018 World Cup match against France. Actions refer to passes, carries, dribbles, shots, and ball recoveries.

In Figure 2, the distribution of Messi's actions against France within 15 seconds leading up to a shot is visualized, with most of the actions being performed in the area of his starting position during the game, which was a central attacking midfielder/striker [3]. Another noteworthy feature of Figure 2 is the fact that Messi was directly involved with the majority of Argentina's shots (7 out of 12) in the match and was a large contributor to Argentina's offense, both as a facilitator and as a scoring threat.

In the grand scheme of things, the 2018 World Cup run of Argentina may be seen as a disappointment due to their departure in the round of 16 and the fact they were ranked as the 5th best team in the world prior to the tournament [4]. However, the results in the tournament could have been even worse without the play and contribution of Lionel Messi. Having won the Copa América in 2021, it remains to see whether the 2022 World Cup will be the year Lionel Messi ascends to the throne and crowns himself and his fellow Argentinians champions on the grandest stage.

References

- [1] World Cup - All-time appearances. www.worldfootball.net/alltime_top_player/wm/1/, 2021. Accessed: 2021-09-04.
- [2] Sam Lee. Lionel Messi's World Cup Legacy. www.goal.com/story/lionelmessilegacy/index.html. Accessed: 2021-09-04.
- [3] Lionel Messi 2018 FIFA World Cup Match Logs. www.fbref.com/en/players/d70ce98e/matchlogs/s1710/summary/Lionel-Messi-Match-Logs. Accessed: 2021-09-04.
- [4] FIFA Men's World Ranking: 2018-06-07. www.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/men?dateId=id12210. Accessed: 2021-09-04.