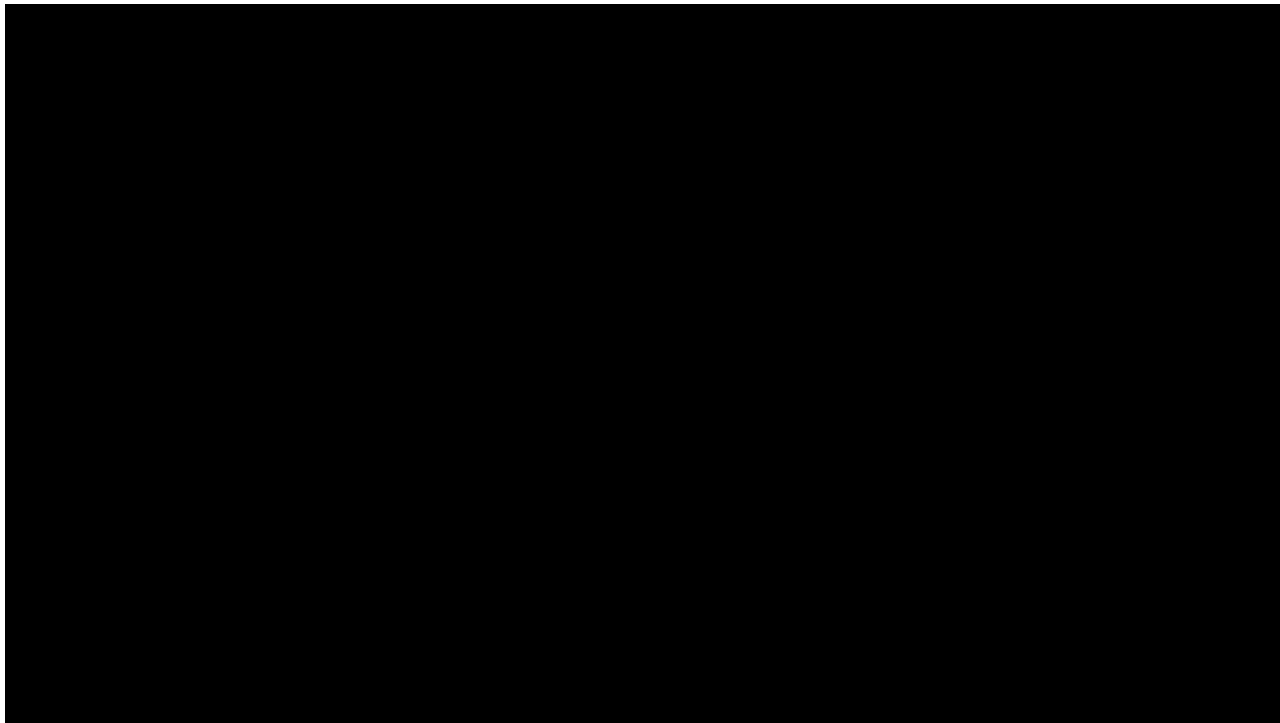


Lionel Messi nets hat trick for Argentina, says games 'can be my last'



ESPN News Services

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[Lionel Messi](#) turned in another vintage performance for [Argentina](#), scoring three goals and adding two assists in a runaway win over [Bolivia](#) in South American World Cup qualifying on Tuesday night.

After the game, a [6-0 win](#) for Argentina in front of a raucous crowd at the Monumental de Nuñez Stadium, the 2022 World Cup winner said he is trying to savor every moment with the national team and acknowledged the end of his playing days is near.

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"It is very nice to play here feeling the affection of the Argentina fans," Messi said after the game. "It makes me emotional to listen how they shout my name. We all enjoy this connection with the fans and we love playing at home."

When asked about his future and whether he'd help Argentina defend their title at the 2026 World Cup, Messi was cautious and honest with his answer.

"I didn't set any date or deadline about my future," Messi said. "I'm just enjoying all this. I am more emotional than ever and taking all the love from the people because I know these can be my last games."

The superstar, who missed the two rounds of the competition in September because of a right ankle injury, played from start to finish Tuesday and added to his personal history book in the process. It was the first time Messi recorded multiple goals and assists in a single game for the national team, and the hat trick -- taking him to 112 international goals -- was his 10th, tying him with [Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo](#) for career games with a hat trick.



Lionel Messi, left, celebrates with Thiago Almada after scoring a goal for Argentina against Bolivia. Getty Images

Messi's first goal came after a mistake by a Bolivian defender, who missed a pass and allowed the 37-year-old Messi to run freely and finish unchallenged in front of goalkeeper Billy Viscarra. Messi assisted on [Lautaro Martínez](#)'s goal in the 42th minute and gave a decisive pass once again in added time on a goal by [Julián Álvarez](#).

Argentina appeared to slow its pace after the break but scored again through [Thiago Almada](#) in the 69th minute. The striker scored from close range after a low cross by [Nahuel Molina](#).

"It's a joy to be present and appreciate this moment. Being surrounded by younger teammates, given my age, makes me feel like a kid again," Messi said. "I find myself doing silly things because I feel so comfortable. As long as I maintain that feeling and can continue contributing to the team, I plan to be here enjoying [the national team]."

Argentina manager Lionel Scaloni shared in the joy of watching his team's superstar and reiterated what he has said all along when asked about how long Messi would continue to play with the national team.

"The only thing I ask of him is to keep playing as long as he can," Scaloni said. "It's a joy to watch him on the soccer field. He never ceases to amaze us."

The result kept the World Cup champions as leaders of the round-robin competition with 22 points after 10 matches, three points clear of second-place [Colombia](#), who earlier beat [Chile](#) 4-0. [Uruguay](#) is in third position with 16 points after a goalless draw with [Ecuador](#).

Two more rounds of South American World Cup qualifying will be played in November.

The 2026 World Cup will be the first expanded version of the tournament, with 48 teams competing in the [United States](#), [Canada](#) and [Mexico](#) for the game's biggest trophy.

Information from The Associated Press was used in this story.