

Triumph and Transformation: Messi's Journey in Club and International Football

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PREFACE

The life of Lionel Messi embodies the pinnacle of footballing achievement. His otherworldly talent captivated the world, shattering records while leading FC Barcelona and the Argentina national team to countless victories. This dissertation delves into Messi's remarkable journey, providing a comprehensive analysis of his extraordinary career.

Beginning with his meteoric rise at Barcelona, this work examines Messi's iconic goals, titles, and the transformative impact he had on the sport. It then explores his triumphs—and heartbreaks—with Argentina, culminating in his ultimate conquest: winning the World Cup. Finally, the dissertation analyzes Messi's continued evolution on the pitch at Paris Saint-Germain and the potential future role with Inter Miami.

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CHAPTER 1

The FC Barcelona years

1.1 Introduction

Lionel Messi’s ascension from a gifted youth prospect to a global football icon unfolded over a remarkable period at FC Barcelona. His time with the Catalan giants serves as a testament to both extraordinary talent and unwavering dedication, ultimately elevating him to a status few athletes ever achieve.

This chapter examines the formative years of Messi’s legendary career. By analyzing his performances, his unparalleled success in winning titles, and the transformative impact he had on FC Barcelona, the groundwork for understanding his enduring influence on the sport is established. His successes are reflected in titles, such as Messi and Guardiola (2011) and Messi et al. (2015), and in astounding individual performances (e.g, Messi, 2009).

This exploration sets the stage for the dissertation’s subsequent analysis of Messi’s continued evolution throughout his career, including the challenges and triumphs he faced beyond Barcelona’s hallowed grounds.

This chapter is organized as follows. Section 1.2 provides background information on Messi’s early years at FC Barcelona. Section 1.3 presents an overview of the titles Messi won during his time at the club. Section 1.4 analyzes Messi’s performance metrics during his tenure at FC Barcelona.

1.2 Background

Lionel Messi joined FC Barcelona’s youth academy, La Masia, at the age of 13. His prodigious talent was evident from an early age, and he quickly rose through the ranks of the club’s youth system.

Messi made his first-team debut for Barcelona in 2004, at the age of 17, under the coaching of Frank Rijkaard. He quickly established himself as a key player for the club, showcasing his remarkable dribbling ability, vision, and goal-scoring prowess.

In fact, Messi’s first goal for Barcelona came on May 1, 2005, in a match against Albacete. In the 88th

minute of the game, Messi received a pass from Ronaldinho and skillfully put the ball above the goalkeeper to celebrate his first goal. At just 17 years and 10 months old, Messi became the youngest goal scorer in the history of the club.

1.3 Titles

During his time at FC Barcelona, Lionel Messi won numerous titles, as depicted in Table 1.1. These include multiple La Liga titles, UEFA Champions League titles, and Copa del Rey titles.

Table 1.1: Lionel Messi's Titles with FC Barcelona

Competition	Number of Titles
La Liga	10
Copa del Rey	7
UEFA Champions League	4

His position in the field and playing style evolved over the years, as different coaches utilized his talents in various ways. For example, under Pep Guardiola, Messi played as a false nine, dropping deep to create space for his teammates and exploit opposition defenses. This constant evolution and adaptation to different roles on the field demonstrate Messi's versatility and footballing intelligence, and were key to his success at Barcelona.

Table 1.2: Goals and Assists by Lionel Messi Each Year in FC Barcelona

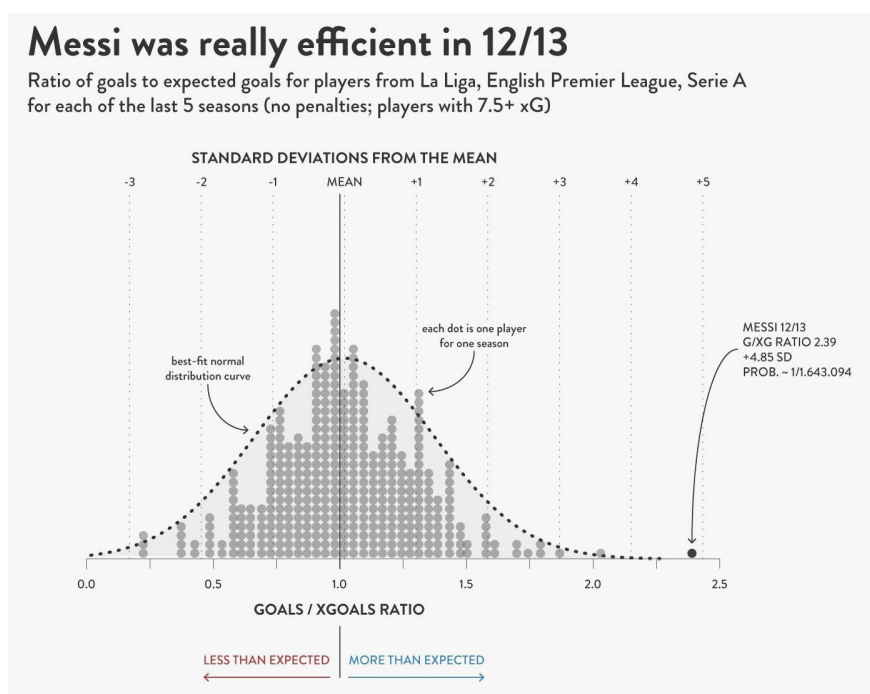
Season	Goals	Assists
2004-05	9	1
2005-06	25	8
2006-07	36	17
2007-08	40	16
2008-09	51	38
2009-10	53	47
2010-11	55	53
2011-12	60	73
2012-13	50	60
2013-14	46	41
2014-15	58	57
2015-16	49	41
2016-17	52	54
2017-18	54	45
2018-19	50	51
2019-20	44	31
2020-21	47	38

1.4 Performance

The performance of Lionel Messi during his tenure at FC Barcelona is nothing short of extraordinary. His goal-scoring and playmaking abilities have earned him numerous accolades and titles. Table 1.2 showcases Messi’s remarkable goal and assist statistics, highlighting his immense contribution to the team’s success.

Messi had a record-breaking calendar year in 2012, scoring 91 goals in all competitions. This peak performance is illustrated in Figure 1.1, which shows the ratio of goals to expected goals (xG) for Messi and other players in the 2012/13 season. Messi consistently outperformed his xG, demonstrating his exceptional finishing ability and efficiency in front of goal.

Figure 1.1: Messi’s Exceptional Finishing in 2012/13



Notes: The figure shows the ratio of goals to expected goals (xG) for several players in the 2012/13 season. *Source:* Twitter, @xGPhilosophy.

Messi was coached by some of the best managers in the world during his time at Barcelona, including Pep Guardiola, Luis Enrique, and Ronald Koeman. A key aspect of Messi’s success was his ability to adapt to different tactical systems and playing styles. For instance, Guardiola implemented a “false nine” role for Messi, allowing him to drop deep and create overloads in midfield. This tactical innovation is explored in Appendix 1.B.

Messi's performances resulted in multiple awards and accolades. Appendix 1.A provides a summary of Messi's Ballon d'Or awards, highlighting his dominance in world football during his time at Barcelona.

1.4.1 Computing expected goals

Expected goals (xG) is a statistical metric that quantifies the quality of a goal-scoring opportunity. It is calculated based on various factors such as shot location, shot angle, and type of shot.

The formula for calculating xG is as follows:

$$xG = \sum_{i=1}^n P(G_i) \times G_i \quad (1.1)$$

where $P(G_i)$ is the probability of scoring from a given shot i , and G_i is the number of goals scored from that shot. The shot location, shot angle, and type of shot are used to determine the probability of scoring from a given shot.

By comparing a player's actual goals to their expected goals, analysts can assess the player's finishing ability and efficiency in front of goal. This metric provides valuable insights into a player's performance and can help coaches and analysts make data-driven decisions.

1.5 Messi's Departure from Barcelona

Despite the deep connection between Messi and FC Barcelona, a complex set of circumstances led to his unexpected departure from the club in 2021. Financial constraints within Barcelona, coupled with LaLiga's salary cap restrictions, made it impossible to renew Messi's contract. Even with substantial salary concessions on Messi's part, the club could not comply with the league's financial regulations.

This unforeseen turn of events marked a shocking end to an era that had defined both the player and the club. Messi's exit underscored the complexities of modern football, highlighting the interplay between sporting ambition and financial considerations.

APPENDIX

1.A Ballon d’Or Awards

This section provides a summary of Lionel Messi’s Ballon d’Or awards.

Table 1.A: Lionel Messi’s Ballon d’Or Awards

Year	Ballon d’Or Position
2007	3rd
2008	2nd
2009	1st
2010	1st
2011	1st
2012	1st
2013	2nd
2014	2nd
2015	1st
2016	2nd
2017	3rd
2018	5th
2019	1st
2020	6th
2021	7th
2022	1st
Total	8 awards

1.B False Nine Role

One of the most notable tactical innovations during Lionel Messi’s time at FC Barcelona was his deployment as a false nine. This positional change, implemented by then-coach Pep Guardiola, revolutionized the way Messi played and influenced the team’s overall style of play. The false nine role allowed Messi to drop deep into midfield, creating numerical superiority and overloading opposition defenses.

The false nine role was a strategic masterstroke that maximized Messi’s playmaking abilities and goal-scoring prowess. This tactic went to change the landscape of modern football, with many teams adopting similar approaches to utilize their creative forwards effectively.

Figure 1.A: Messi and Guardiola



Notes: The figure shows a picture of Messi and Guardiola. *Source:* Eurosport.

CHAPTER 2

Messi's International Journey

2.1 Introduction

While Lionel Messi's legacy is intrinsically tied to his accomplishments with FC Barcelona, his journey with the Argentina national team presents a different facet of his illustrious career. This chapter delves into Messi's complex and captivating history representing his home country. From early promise to heartbreaking defeats and ultimately, the pinnacle of international success, this exploration provides a comprehensive understanding of Messi's impact on Argentine football.

We begin by tracing Messi's early involvement with the national team, highlighting his rise through the youth ranks (e.g., Messi & Tocalli, 2005) and his debut with the senior squad. The narrative then delves into the various tournaments Messi participated in, analyzing his performances and the team's overall results. Particular emphasis is placed on the Copa América and the FIFA World Cup, where Messi faced immense pressure and scrutiny.

Finally, the chapter culminates with an in-depth analysis of Argentina's historic victory in the 2022 World Cup, examining the factors that contributed to their triumph and Messi's pivotal role in achieving this long-awaited glory. This chapter aims to provide a balanced perspective on Messi's international career, acknowledging both the challenges he faced and the ultimate redemption he achieved.

2.2 Early Years and Rise in the National Team

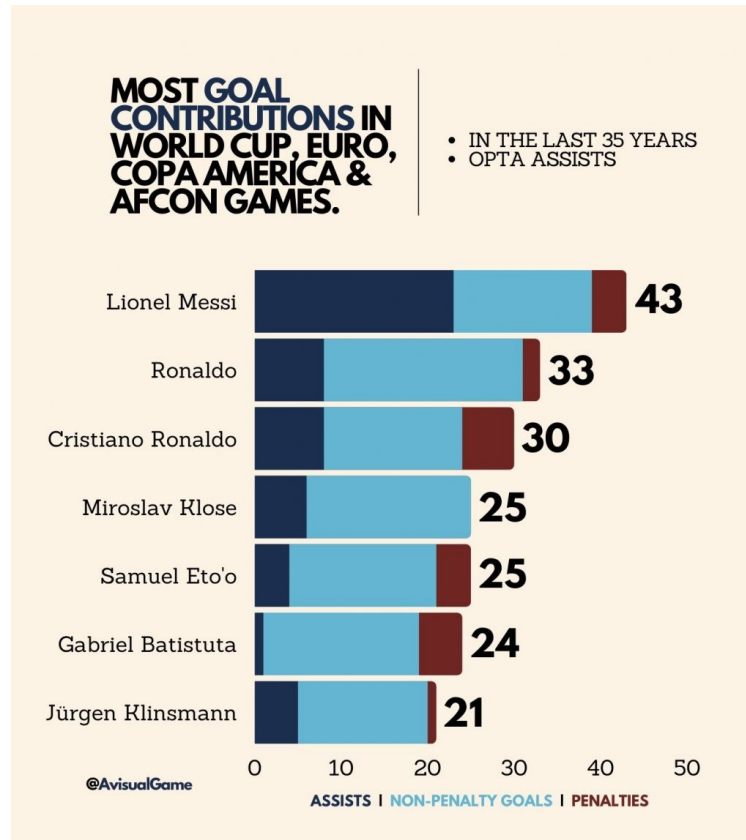
Messi's association with the Argentina national team began at a young age. He represented Argentina in various youth tournaments, showcasing his exceptional talent and quickly establishing himself as a rising star. His performances at the 2005 FIFA World Youth Championship, where he led Argentina to victory and earned the Golden Ball and Golden Shoe awards, signaled his immense potential on the international stage.

Messi's senior debut for Argentina came in 2005, and he quickly became an integral part of the team. However, early success in youth tournaments did not immediately translate to similar triumphs with the senior squad. Despite Messi's individual brilliance, Argentina faced several setbacks in major tournaments, including Copa América and the World Cup.

2.3 Challenges and Heartbreaks

Messi's international career was marked by a series of near misses and disappointments. Argentina reached the Copa América final in 2007, 2015, and 2016, only to fall short each time. The 2014 World Cup final defeat to Germany was another agonizing moment for Messi and the team.

Figure 2.1: Messi's International Contributions among Top Players



Notes: The figure shows top international contributions in the last 35 years including the World Cup and the main continental tournaments. *Source:* Twitter, @avisualgame

These defeats led to intense scrutiny and criticism, with some questioning Messi's leadership and ability to replicate his club success with the national team. The pressure on Messi was immense, as the hopes of a

nation rested on his shoulders. All of this despite his consistent performances and contributions, which can be noticed in Figure 2.2.

2.4 The 2022 World Cup Triumph

Lionel Scaloni's appointment as the national team coach marked a turning point in Messi's international career. With him, Messi achieved the Copa América victory in 2021, breaking the long-standing trophy drought for Argentina, and the Finalissima against Italy in 2021 (Messi & Scaloni, 2021, 2022b). However, the ultimate prize remained the FIFA World Cup, a tournament that had eluded Messi throughout his career, which he finally won in 2022 (Messi & Scaloni, 2022a). Messi, at the age of 35, led the team with exceptional performances, scoring crucial goals and providing assists throughout the tournament.

The final against France (Deschamps, 2022) was a dramatic affair, with Argentina emerging victorious after a penalty shootout. This triumph marked the culmination of Messi's long and arduous journey with the national team. He had finally achieved the ultimate prize in international football, cementing his status as one of the greatest players of all time.

Figure 2.2: Messi lifting the World Cup trophy



Notes: The picture shows Lionel Messi and his teammates celebrating their victory in the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

2.5 Legacy and Impact

Lionel Messi’s impact on Argentine football extends far beyond trophies and accolades. He has inspired generations of young players and instilled a sense of belief in the national team. His dedication, resilience, and unwavering passion for representing his country have left an indelible mark on the sport.

Messi’s journey with Argentina is a testament to the power of perseverance and the pursuit of dreams. Despite facing numerous challenges and setbacks, he never gave up on his ambition to bring glory to his nation. His story will continue to inspire aspiring footballers and fans worldwide for years to come.

APPENDIX

2.A Messi’s International Goals and Statistics

This appendix provides a detailed breakdown of Lionel Messi’s goals and statistics for the Argentina national team.

Table 2.A: Lionel Messi’s Goals for Argentina National Team

Competition	Goals	Matches	Ratio
FIFA World Cup	13	26	0.50
Copa América	13	34	0.38
World Cup Qualifiers	31	65	0.48
International Friendlies	49	54	0.90
Total	106	145	0.73

2.B Messi’s 2022 World Cup Performance

The 2022 FIFA World Cup witnessed Lionel Messi at his peak, both as a leader and as a player. Appendix Table [2.B](#) provides a glimpse into his remarkable contributions throughout the tournament.

His presence on the field was near-constant, matching the tournament’s high for minutes played. While narrowly missing the top scorer title, his seven goals were crucial in propelling Argentina to victory. He further showcased his playmaking abilities with three assists and a significant number of key passes, creating numerous scoring opportunities for his teammates.

Beyond the goals and assists, Messi’s influence is evident in his overall involvement in the game. His

Table 2.B: Messi's 2022 World Cup Statistics

Statistic	Messi's Value	Tournament High (Player)
Minutes Played	690	690 (Mbappe)
Goals	7	8 (Mbappe)
Assists	3	3
Passes Completed	347	684 (Rodri)
Key Passes	21	22 (Griezmann)
Shots	32	32
Shots From Outside Box	11	11
Total Dribbles	34	52 (Mbappe)
Successful Dribbles	15	25 (Mbappe)
Tackles	5	26 (Hakimi)
Fouls Won	22	22

dribbling skills, despite not topping the charts, remained a constant threat to opponents, while his passing accuracy and vision orchestrated Argentina's attacking plays.

These statistics not only reflect Messi's individual brilliance but also highlight his role as an inspiration for his team. His dedication, leadership, and unwavering pursuit of victory motivated those around him, contributing significantly to Argentina's World Cup triumph. His performance in the 2022 World Cup cemented his place among the greatest footballers of all time, leaving an indelible mark on the history of the sport.

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