

# LIONEL MESSI

**A Biography of the  
Argentine Superstar**



**BENJAMIN SOUTHERLAND**

# **Lionel Messi**

**A Biography of the Argentine Superstar**

Copyright © 2016 Benjamin Southerland

All rights reserved. Neither this book nor any portion thereof may be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission. Published in the United States of America.

Cover photo by Fanny Schertzer is licensed under CC BY 3.0 / Modified from original.

Visit Benjamin Southerland's website at [benjaminsoutherland.com](http://benjaminsoutherland.com).

# Table of Contents

[Chapter 1: Humble Beginnings](#)

[Chapter 2: Growth Issues](#)

[Chapter 3: The Making of a Young Champion](#)

[Chapter 4: Becoming Soccer's King](#)

[Chapter 5: National Play](#)

[Chapter 6: Personal Life](#)

[About the Author](#)

# Chapter 1: Humble Beginnings

Luis Lionel Andres Messi (Lionel “Leo” Messi) was born in Rosario, Argentina on June 24, 1987. He was born to working-class parents Jorge Messi, a factory worker, and Celia Cuccittini, a part-time cleaning lady. He has two older brothers, Rodrigo and Matias, and a sister, Maria Sol. The Messi family descends from both Spanish and Italian ancestry.

Rosario is a port city on the western banks of the Paraná River. It’s the largest city in the Santa Fe province and the third most populated in Argentina. It has produced several professional footballers, artists, and political activists. It is a city rich in history and Argentinian patriotism. Until he was 13 years old, Messi lived at 525 Estado de Israel in a lower-middle class neighborhood. The family is said to still own the house where he grew up even though no one lives there now. Messi has reportedly kept close ties to Rosario as his home. He owns a penthouse in the city and maintains a compound just outside the city where most of his family lives.

Friends and family describe Lionel as a quiet, shy little boy who loved to play with paper and plastic balls. His mother, teachers, and friends report he was not particularly interested in school and was not an outstanding student. He had problems with reading and math but excelled in physical education and art. He was very timid, and the only time he drew attention to himself was on the soccer field. He was so small and fast, his brother, Rodrigo, gave him the nickname “The Flea” which has followed him since.

Jorge Messi says he first discovered his son’s talent was when the boy was four years old and he joined Jorge and his other brothers in a game in the streets. His father recalled, “We were stunned when we saw what he could do. He had never played before.” But, it is his Grandmother Celia to whom Lionel gives the credit for doing the most to inspire his soccer career. She encouraged his parents to buy him soccer equipment even though he seemed too young to know how to use any of it. She encouraged the family and coaches to give him opportunities to play because she believed in him. She died when Lionel was only 10 years old, but her influence has been lasting.

He says he still dedicates every goal he scores to her in what has become his trademark celebration of pointing to the sky.

Lionel started his soccer career at the age of five as a member of the Grandoli Football Club. The club is run by parents and its dirt pitch lies on the banks of the Paraná River. Lionel's two older brothers were playing with Grandoli, and their grandmother, Celia, brought them to practices every Tuesday and Thursday. Salvador Aparicio was the club's youth coach, and he was short a player one evening when he spotted Messi playing with a ball in the stands. Aparicio had coached Messi's two older brothers and knew the family well. He asked Messi's mom if he could borrow him. She was reluctant, but his grandmother said, "Let him play. What can it hurt?" He was very small and timid, but showed enough potential that Aparicio kept him on the team. Aparicio later stated, "I was gobsmailed. It was if he had been playing football all his life." He would later comment on Messi's early talent by saying, "Later, in the youth teams, he scored six or seven goals in every match." He added, "Instead of waiting for the goalkeeper to kick the ball, he would take the ball off him and start dribbling all over the pitch. He was supernatural."

Aparicio has stated that people would pile in for games just to watch Lionel play. He was the youngest and smallest on the team, but the other players never cut him any slack. He had to scrap and earn every play. Aparicio described Messi's playing style as "free". In his second year with Grandoli, Jorge Messi accepted the offer to be the coach of Lionel's '87 team. They won every match, including tournaments and friendlies.

In 1994, at only seven years old, Messi joined Newell's Old Boys, Argentina's premier youth soccer club. The team holds the most national titles in the Argentine Football Association's youth tournaments and has been the team for many soccer greats including legendary Diego Maradona. Lionel was following a family tradition as Jorge Messi had played there until he began his military training at thirteen and both of Messi's brothers played there as well. The club had heard how extraordinary Messi was and asked his brothers to bring him for a trial so that they could see for themselves if he was ready to move into their league.

Newell's coach, Adrian Coria, noted, "When you saw him, you would think,



‘This kid can’t play ball. He’s a dwarf, he’s too fragile, too small.’ But immediately you’d realize that he was born different, that he was a phenomenon and that he was going to be something impressive.” Messi became a member of the powerhouse team known as “The Machine of ’87”. The team only lost one game in four years and were named after their birth year, 1987. Messi has noted that he particularly favored the Cantola International Tournament held in Lima, Peru in 1996. Newell’s won the tournament over twenty-five other teams from Argentina, Columbia, Ecuador, and Chile. Nine-year-old Messi attracted media attention at the tournament with his hat tricks. Messi was often asked to entertain the crowd during the first team’s half-times by playing “keepy-uppy.” Crowds thought he was a dwarf, they could not believe a ten-year-old could be that talented.

Stories abound about his accomplishments while playing at Newell’s. His second coach, Ernesto Vecchio, recalled, “He didn’t need to be taught a thing. What can you teach a Maradona or Pelé? There are only very tiny things for a coach to correct.” Another of Messi’s coaches at Newell’s, Carlos Morales, would award him with cookies and ice cream for every goal he scored in a game. The count would be so high, that Morales had to up the criteria and award him for goals he scored with his head since he was always the shortest player. A small Messi once locked himself in his bathroom causing him to miss the first half of a game. The team was behind 1–0 when he broke himself out at half-time and went on to score three goals in the second half for a win.

Messi was still a teenager when people started comparing him to Diego Maradona. Maradona led the Argentinean team to win the World Cup in 1986. He is regarded by many to be the best soccer player who has ever lived. He retired in 1997 and then managed and coached several teams. Maradona was left-footed like Messi, and his overall skills seemed unmatched in his era. He was described as a creative force on the pitch who orchestrated beautiful goals. Messi was exhibiting those same amazing skills as a young boy. He amazed his coaches and fans with his movement of the ball. It seemed as though the ball was stuck to his feet no matter how he moved. Maradona was his idol and he emulated his style well.

It was indeed amazing to watch such a little guy display the moves and

prowess that seemed innate to Messi, but his lack of growth eventually began to concern his coaches. Morales noted, “We knew that he was immensely talented but we were worried that the fact that he was so small would prevent him turning pro.” Even for someone who might naturally have diminutive features, Lionel’s size did not seem healthy. The directors and coaches at Newell’s would finally suggest that Jorge and Celia take Lionel to a doctor to determine whether he had medical issues causing his lack of maturation or if he was naturally small in stature. They recommended Dr. Diego Schwarzstein.



## Chapter 2: Growth Issues

Dr. Diego Schwarzstein was an endocrinologist who treated patients on a daily basis for the growth issues Messi was experiencing. Messi was subjected to over a year of complex tests, appointments with various physicians, analysis, and clinics to determine that he did in fact suffer from a rare hormone deficiency. Dr. Schwarzstein described it as the pituitary gland, a pea-sized gland in the brain, not producing enough growth hormone so Messi experienced growth failure. If left untreated, Messi would possibly suffer various physical and psychological medical complications in the future. He was prescribed a treatment of a biosynthetic growth hormone that would need to be injected daily for several years.

His friends and family marveled at how responsible Lionel was for administering his treatments himself. In an interview, he described it as being “like cleaning my teeth. In the beginning, when people saw me doing my injections, they asked what was going on. But they eventually got used to it. It wasn’t really a chore and I knew it was important for my future. And I was responsible. Especially about anything having to do with football.”

There has been speculation about Messi’s use of hormone treatment and whether it should be considered doping to give him an unfair advantage in sports. Dr. Schwarzstein has maintained his opinion on its necessity for Messi: “But you have to differentiate between growth hormone treatment for an adult who doesn’t need it, who is looking for a physical benefit—and they are high doses and can have very negative side effects—and the treatment of a physical deficiency in a young boy.”

The treatment was costly, estimated to be between \$900–\$1,500 a month, and for the first year or so, Jorge’s insurance, social services, and the company Jorge worked for paid most of the cost. But, when the economy in Argentina began to collapse, the cost could no longer be covered. Jorge was forced to ask Newell’s Old Boys to pay for the treatments for Lionel. At first Newell’s agreed, but reports differ about what finally transpired. Jorge Messi has been quoted in interviews as saying, “They said, ‘We will pay for the treatment, don’t worry.’ But it was like begging. They gave me 300 pesos and never any

more. If they had paid, naturally he would have stayed at Newell's." Newell's has commented that they contributed what they could to help the Messis, but they were not aware of how expensive the treatments would be and they could not afford the full cost.

At twelve years old, Messi was being scouted by River Plate, the club in Buenos Aires. He impressed the coaches in tryouts and they were negotiating offers; however, River Plate only housed players who were at least thirteen. Because of Argentina's economic collapse at the time, the club could not afford to help with Messi's medical hormone treatments. A suitable agreement could not be reached, and Messi chose to pursue other options. River's former youth coach, Eduardo Abrahamian, stated in an interview, "I don't know what was said with his father. I can't say. All I know is that I wanted to sign him. I am a River fan and I didn't want the club to lose out. I wanted him to come because of his technical qualities but also because I'm a River fan. I knew that one day I would see him from the stands playing in the Primera and that he would blow me away again. So that was my interest and my intention."

# Chapter 3: The Making of a Young Champion

Relatives in Catalonia were able to convince Horacio Gaggioli to help the Messis arrange a tryout for Lionel with FC Barcelona. Josep Maria Minguella, the man who had brought Maradona to Barcelona twenty years earlier, helped to make arrangements for Lionel to enter a training period with FC Barcelona. The Messis took a chance, and Lionel went to work out with the team for what they thought would be two weeks. Gaggioli recalls, “I met them at the airport and when I saw Leo, I thought, ‘Where is this kid going to play?’ He was so small and so skinny that the notion of him playing football seemed impossible.”

It was very rare for a player so young and not European to receive offers from FC Barcelona, but Messi was determined to be a success in the world of professional soccer. His talent and sportsmanship amazed the other players and club directors during his tryout period. The club’s sports director, Charly Rexach, was busy at the 2000 Olympics and did not return until the end of Messi’s two-week tryout. He asked that Lionel be put in a game with some older players so he could evaluate the skills of this 13-year-old who appeared to be so physically weak. He watched a few minutes of the game and was quoted as saying, “I turned up to watch and after only three minutes, the time it takes me to walk around the pitch, I could see that he was a small but spectacular player, who was quicker than anyone else. I said to myself: ‘We’re having him.’ There was no way we were going to miss out on such an outstanding talent.” Quimet Rife, the club’s youth coach, was even more impressed with Messi’s talent. The two men knew they had to strike a deal to avoid losing Lionel Messi to another club.

FC Barcelona kept Messi for another two weeks of training and testing as directors considered the advantages to committing to the Messis. They wanted doctors to assure them that Lionel would continue to grow, and they wanted to know if he could handle the emotional stress of being away from his family since he was only thirteen. Barcelona had never signed a foreign player at such a young age, so to most of the directors and coaches, Messi

seemed like too much of a risk. It was very difficult for those who were convinced that offering the Messis a contract was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to convince club directors and the president who were skeptical about offering so much to such a diminutive 13-year-old foreigner who needed coverage for medical treatments. Former Barcelona director general Joan Lacueva told the Associated Press, “Rexach and Rife were clear about signing him, saying there was no other player in the world like him. There was no doubt he was a pearl, and you didn’t need to know football to know that.”

It has been reported that Jorge Messi was growing exasperated with the delays and requested a meeting with club officials. He gave them the ultimatum that they either sign a contract or he was taking Messi home for good. Rexach arranged a lunch with Gaggioli, Minguella, and Jorge at the Pompeia tennis club to try and placate the Messis so negotiations could continue. Charly Rexach reportedly was so worried he might lose Messi that he drew up a contract on a napkin in the restaurant and signed it. FC Barcelona would pay for all of Messi’s hormone treatments. They would pay Jorge Messi \$40,000 a year as Lionel’s salary, and they would find Jorge a job so the family could relocate.

The napkin has been laminated and framed and is kept in a safety deposit box in Barcelona. Photographs show that it reads: “I, Charly Rexach, in my capacity as technical secretary for FC Barcelona, and despite the existence of some opinions against it, commit to signing Lionel Messi as long as the conditions agreed are met.” It has been noted that Rexach’s clause, “despite the existence of some opinions,” was a statement to the Messis about the risk Rexach was taking and the expectations he had for Lionel not to disappoint. There are conflicting reports about whether the napkin will eventually be displayed in the City Museum Barcelona, but for now, Gaggioli has it secured in a bank safety deposit box.

In February 2001, the entire Messi family made the move to Barcelona seeking a better life for all of their children. There would be problems, though. Leo was able to gain a provisional license in March, but as a foreigner he could not play in national competitions with the children’s A team. He was forced to play with the children’s B team which had already

formed, so he was not receiving as much play time as he had hoped. Newell's was also not negotiating transfer arrangements like they should, which was hindering his enrollment in the Spanish Football Federation. Then, in April, Lionel had his first major injury, a fractured left leg. It would be June before he could play again.

The family moved into an apartment on Carlos III Avenue in Catalan, and the children enrolled in school. Lionel was still not an impressive student and he continued to struggle with his studies, and his younger sister was not adjusting to life in Spain as the family had hoped. Later that summer, Celia was forced home to Argentina due to family illness and the other children wanted to accompany her. Leo's soccer career and their life in Spain were not going as they had planned. Later, when Leo and Jorge were able to join the family in Rosario, they knew they had important decisions to make about the family's future.

Jorge called a family meeting where he says he made it clear that they had to all agree on the future for the family, but returning to Barcelona would be entirely Leo's decision. In a later interview, he recalled, "I asked Leo, 'What do you want to do? Because the decision is yours, if you want to come back to Argentina then we'll go back.' Leo looked at me and said, 'No I want to stay, I want to play football in Barcelona and want to play in the first division for Barcelona.' It was his decision; nobody forced him into anything. That's why I stayed with him." Celia Messi stayed in Rosario with the other children, and Jorge returned to Barcelona with Lionel. It was a great sacrifice for the entire family that they still contemplate today. Jorge has even been quoted as claiming that if he had to make the decision again, he is not sure he would choose to split up the family.

So, on August 20, 2001, Lionel and Jorge Messi returned to Barcelona determined to make Lionel a professional footballer. FC Barcelona had not come through with all of the promises in the first contract. Jorge was unemployed and Leo's transfer from the Argentina Football Association was still not official. He could only play in tournaments and friendlies. There were also issues with the transfer of payment the Messis were promised, so they never received the full \$40,000 agreed upon in the first contract. Continued disagreements among club directors over investing so much in one

young player jeopardized the Messi's future. Lionel's only choice was to make every effort to impress in the friendlies and tournaments in order to continue proving his worth, and that he did. Albert Benaiges, a renowned coach in the youth division commented on Lionel in his first years with FC Barcelona, "He did something that says so much about him because a lot of young kids don't like doing it. In one year he played with the Barça C youth team, then Barça B and then with Barça A. But then he went back and played for Barça C again afterwards. You could say to him, 'Look, here's the ball, let's play a match,' and he would get on with it. He just loved playing. He didn't mind what level. Some kids, when they play for the A team and then you ask them to play for the B team, they pull a face but with him, he always gave everything."

December brought a new contract year, and because Lionel had worked so hard to prove his potential, FC Barcelona negotiated an even better second contract so the Messis could recoup some of their losses. Jorge reportedly invested a portion of the offerings into the flat at Carlos III Avenue to make the entire family more comfortable when they gathered in Barcelona. In February 2002, the paperwork and bureaucratic issues were finally resolved and the Spanish Football Association allowed FC Barcelona to officially sign Lionel.

Lionel had spent over a year at La Masia, Barcelona's youth football training facility, as a shy and lonely teenager. Soccer had been his life and his only real friend and companion was his father. He showed up for training before the other players and stayed after they had gone home. He has stated that he had nothing else to occupy his time and he was completely focused on soccer. Finally being allowed to play at a competitive level opened doors professionally and socially for Messi. His teammate, Victor Vazquez, recalled in an interview, "The first few days, he sat in the corner and never said anything. He was very shy until one day Piqué, Cesc, and myself went over to talk to him."

Piqué has described Messi's early days with the team as inspirational, "We thought he was mute. He was in the dressing room, on the bench, just sitting. He said nothing to us for the first month. We traveled to Switzerland to play a tournament, and he started to talk and have fun. We thought it was another

person. He was really good, but he was really small and thin. His legs were like fingers. One coach said, 'Don't try to tackle him strong, because maybe you will break him.' And we said, 'O.K., but don't worry because we cannot catch him.'"

He befriended his teammates, including Cesc Fàbregas and Gerard Piqué, and they became known as the "Baby Dream Team", Barcelona's best-ever youth program.

Messi began to shine quickly as an integral part of the Baby Dream Team. One of the most important tournaments was the Maestrelli in Pisa, Italy in April and May of that year. Messi was named Player of the Tournament and really began to come out of his shell with new confidence and spirit. Fàbregas commented on the change in Messi during the Italian tournament, "At first we thought he was mute. Then, thanks to PlayStation and that trip to Italy, we discovered that he knew how to talk."

Vazquez noted, "Until that moment, he would always return to the dressing room, sit down in a corner, change, and leave without a word. In Italy, he began to gain confidence." During this time, his teammates gave him the affectionate nickname, Dwarf.

Messi moved up to the A team, the Cadets A, for an unprecedented 2002–2003 season. Messi was the team's top scorer with 36 goals in 30 games playing as the second striker. The season was particularly memorable because the team won a treble. His teammates and coaches have many impressive stories of Messi during that "dream" season, but a favorite is when he was supposed to play with a mask during the final game. He fractured his cheekbone in an early game, and the only way medics would allow him to play was wearing a protective mask. The mask was ill-fitting and bothered him, so he took it off after just a few minutes. Alex Garcia, who was coaching at the time, recalls telling Messi that he'll have to come off the pitch if he doesn't put the mask back on. Messi told Garcia to give him just a few minutes. In just five minutes, Messi scored twice to bring the team to a 3–0 lead before he had to leave the game.

At the end of the "Baby Dream Team" season, Messi, Fàbregas, and Piqué would all get offers to join Arsenal, the premier football club in Holloway,



London. Fàbregas chose to join Arsenal. Piqué and Messi decided to stay in Spain, at least for another season. Stories differ about why, but the Arsenal directors have said they felt he was comfortable in Spain and not ready to make such a drastic move again. For whatever reason, he stayed and there were big changes for FC Barcelona.

In June 2003, Joan LaPorta became the club president and Josep Colomer was named the new football director. The greatest change for Messi might have been the appointment of Guillermo Hoyos as the youth B team coach. Hoyos and Messi were quick friends and formed a winning partnership for the club. In the pre-season, they lost only one game, and club directors decided that Messi has already outgrown the league. He and Gerard Piqué were moved up to the A team, and his quick ascent through the ranks of FC Barcelona began. All in one season, he moved through three levels and made a brief appearance in the first team.

On the A team, he scored eighteen goals in eleven championship games. He was moved up to help the suffering Barça C team, where he scored five goals in ten games. He impressed directors so much that they decided, even though he was only sixteen years old, he was ready to move to Barça B. Coach Pere Gratacós said a special training program had to be devised for Messi because he was so much smaller than his teammates and competitors. The coach was also amazed at how easily Messi moved among the league levels that season, helping wherever he was needed. Lionel's 36 goals in official games and at least 15 in friendlies gave him plenty of leverage to negotiate a new contract. FC Barcelona did not want to risk losing him as they had Fàbregas the year before, so they negotiated with Jorge Messi, who acted as Lionel's manager, and signed the sixteen-year-old's first professional contract.

In the 2004–2005 season at seventeen years old, Messi was the third youngest player ever for Barcelona. He was a substitute player who only saw about eighty minutes of playing time that season. His debut was October 16th against Espanyol, where he came on the pitch in the 82nd minute and saw little action at the close of the game. He scored his first professional goal on May 1, 2005 against Albacete, becoming the youngest player to ever score for Barcelona. Later that summer, he became a member of the 20-and-under World Cup team playing for Argentina. The Argentines won their fifth

Under-20 World Cup title that season with Lionel Messi as their star player. As the highest goal-scorer, he was named Player of the Tournament. When he returned to Barcelona, he signed a new lucrative contract on his 18th birthday as a Senior team member. The contract extended through 2010 and included an unprecedented 150-million-euro buyout.

# Chapter 4: Becoming Soccer's King

Despite the new contract, FC Barcelona chose not to play Messi at the beginning of the 2005–2006 season. The Spanish Football Federation once again modified its policies regarding naturalized players. Clubs were allowed three foreign players, and FC Barcelona had already filled that quota with Ronaldinho, Eto'o, and Marquez. Messi, however, should have already been considered naturalized as he had moved up through the ranks of a Spanish club. FC Barcelona did not want to risk violations, so they chose not to play Messi until the matter could be settled. They were also worried that another club might steal their superstar because he was discouraged with the never-ending politics of the Spanish Football Association. It was said that a legitimate offer came from Inter Milan, the Italian football club who was reportedly willing to pay his buyout clause and triple his wages. So, on September 16th, Messi's contract was updated to extend to 2014. In an effort to end the issues plaguing his eligibility, Messi was able to declare Spanish citizenship on September 26, 2005.

Coached by Frank Rijkaard, Messi quickly proved himself as a first string right-winger. He started in major matches and scored 8 goals in the 25 games he was able to play, but his season was cut short on March 7, 2006 when he tore his hamstring on the return leg in the match against Chelsea. It was a four-centimeter tear which would take four to six weeks to heal. He worked hard to recover, and there was hope that he might make an appearance in the Champion League final on May 7. He was disappointed when Rijkaard decided not to risk it and did not even list him as a substitute. Messi watched as his teammates lifted the cup on the pitch for only the second time in Barcelona history. He was so disappointed, he would not go onto the field to join in the celebration. He later told a reporter about his regrets, "I'd been central to the team in an important stage of the tournament and all that happened was that I had a rush of blood to the head and made a decision I'd take back if I could."

In the 2006–2007 season, Messi continued to prove himself as one of the best players in the world and was being compared more and more often to Diego Maradona. He was able to score 17 goals in 36 games during the season even

though he suffered another injury on November 12 in the match against Real Zaragoza. Defender Alberto Zapater ran over Messi's left foot. The fifth metatarsal was broken and required surgery. Messi was out for three months' recovery time. His greatest moment of the season came when he returned on March 10th in the match against Real Madrid, when he became the first man in twelve years to score a hat-trick. He was one of only seven players to have done so in Barça's history.

Later in the season, Messi wowed the world with two goals that were amazingly similar to Maradona's famous Goal of the Century and Hand of God. The Spanish media nicknamed him "Messiah" as he was becoming the superstar of FC Barcelona. In 2007, he was considered the third best player in the world, nominated for the Ballon d'Or, and voted second for the FIFA World Player of the Year. As Messi enjoyed success as a world-renowned player, FC Barcelona was struggling, and fans and club directors were questioning the effectiveness of Coach Frank Rijkaard.

The 2007–2008 season was a frustrating one for both Messi and FC Barcelona. On December 15, in a Champions League match against Celtic, Messi tore his left hamstring and was out again for six weeks. He returned in February 2008 to face Celtic again and led Barcelona to a 3–2 victory by scoring two goals and becoming the competition's top scorer with six goals. He reinjured his hamstring on March 4th amid criticism that Rijkaard had rushed his return to play before he was completely recuperated. FC Barcelona was plagued by injuries throughout the season, and they finished the season with no trophies. Club directors and fans were demanding changes.

The 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing caused more controversy for Messi and FC Barcelona. Messi was asked to play with the Argentine team for Olympic gold and miss the entire month of August with Barcelona. The Olympic games could not come at a worse time for FC Barcelona. Club president Joan Laporta replaced Frank Rijkaard with Pep Guardiola, who was a club youth coach, and there was talk Ronaldinho would be leaving as well. With the talk that Messi would sign a new \$8 million contract, club officials were not happy that he was considering taking time to play in Beijing. Argentina was citing FIFA's policy that athletes under 23 years old should be released to play for their home country in Olympic games.

Months of arbitration between FC Barcelona and the Argentine Olympic team ensued, so that Messi was left not knowing where he would be training or when. Both sides continued to file appeals and then awaited a ruling from CAS (the Courts of Arbitration for Sports). Messi maintained that he would follow the CAS ruling whenever it came, but his preference was that he be allowed to represent his country in the Olympics. He left for training for the Olympics before the ruling in favor of Barcelona came on August 6. Although the CAS ruling stated the Olympics did not appear on FIFA's calendar so there should be no compulsion to allow players to participate, it also encouraged players and coaches to reach a decision equitable to all and in accordance with Olympic spirit. FC Barcelona did concede to terms with Argentina at the last minute, and Messi was allowed to help his country win the gold in the 2008 Olympic games. He described it in interviews as a dream come true for him.

FC Barcelona's decision to allow Messi to play in the Olympics might have been one of the best in club history. The Olympics made Messi a star worldwide, and his popularity meant popularity for FC Barcelona. Messi returned to Spain from the Olympics with new zeal and confidence, and 2009 would become a landmark season of success for the club. Messi inherited Ronaldinho's #10 jersey and led FC Barcelona to win the Champions League, La Liga, and Spanish Super Cup titles. He was not only the Champions League's top scorer, but he was also the youngest to ever earn that status. The team enjoyed their first treble that season as the first Spanish team to ever achieve one, and successes continued when they accomplished a sextuple. Another great moment in the season came when Barcelona won the Club World Cup with a 2–1 extra-time victory over Estudiantes in Abu Dhabi. Fans were amazed when Messi drove in the winning goal with his chest.

It was indeed a golden season for Messi, leading his team to unprecedented victories and securing soccer's coveted top honor for himself. In December 2009, Messi was awarded both the Ballon d'Or and the FIFA World Player of the Year award. There seemed to be no more doubt that, at the age of twenty-two, he was the best soccer player in the World. He seemed to be on top of the world in his personal life as well because he formally announced in January 2009 on a Spanish TV show that he had a girlfriend, Antonella

Roccuzzo. They grew up together in Rosario and she is a cousin to one of his childhood friends. Afterwards, they were seen in public together appearing very happy, although both a bit camera shy.

And, just when other players might rest on their laurels, Messi continued to break records and set precedents through the 2010–2011 season. He marked the season as the first Spanish player to ever score 50 goals in one season while he led Barcelona to its Spanish La Liga title, the Spanish Super Cup title, and a record-breaking season with 16 consecutive league victories, a record in Spanish football. Even though Barcelona could not secure the Champions League title, Messi was notably its best player. In the April 6th match against Arsenal, Messi scored all four of Barcelona's goals and became its all-time top scorer in the competition. He finished the season with a remarkable 53 goals and 24 assists.

Messi's accomplishments were being lauded in the press which sometimes referred to him as the "God of Football". The *Catalan Daily Sport* called him "football's Picasso", insisting: "We're going to have to expand the dictionary to find new adjectives for him, because majestic, lethal, magic, incomparable and divine have all been used up." Its website implored fans: "Don't say football, say Messi." *El Mundo Deportivo* went for "mythical, universal, the Lord's anointed one.". With the praise came the trophies: he was awarded the Golden Boot and the most coveted of all, FIFA Ballon d'Or. The 2010 season was the inaugural year for the award which is a combination of France Football's Ballon d'Or and FIFA's Player of the Year award.

In the 2011 season, Barcelona became known as the best team in the world. Messi led his team to the La Liga title, the Champions League, and the Spanish Super Cup. Messi scored eight times in the Spanish Super Cup, becoming the competition's all-time top scorer. In December, Barcelona took the FIFA Club World Cup with Messi scoring twice in the final match. He was awarded the competition's Golden Ball as the best player. Additionally, he was awarded the FIFA Ballon d'Or again in 2011 and the first ever UEFA Best Player in Europe Award.

In 2012, Messi amazed the world by breaking even more records than anyone thought possible. Although he failed to lead FC Barcelona to become the first team to defend the UEFA Champions League, he became the competition's

top scorer for an unprecedented fourth season with his 14 goals being the highest number in a European Cup season. On March 20th, at 24 years old, with a hat-trick against Granada, Messi surpassed the 57-year record by Cesar Rodriguez to become the top goal scorer in Barcelona's history. Pep Guardiola lauded Messi as the "Michael Jordan" of football: "Leo has entered history. Those who knew Cesar have told me that he was exceptional. I want to thank the team for overcoming all adversity and this guy who is continuing to make history. It's all been said before about Messi. He doesn't only score goals, he scores great goals; each one is better than the last. We are seeing the very best in action. I'm sorry for those who try to take his throne but this kid is different, better, we are excited to have him."

Although Messi was enjoying continued success in 2012, FC Barcelona was not fairing as well. They lost the league to Real Madrid and were eliminated in the Champions League semi-finals by the eventual champions, Chelsea. Perhaps sensing the end of an era, Pep Guardiola announced he would step down as manager. His departure as Barcelona's celebrated coach, after 13 trophies, including three La Liga titles and two Champions Leagues, saddened Barcelona's staff and fans. Tito Vilanova, who had been an assistant under Guardiola, was named the new manager.

In 2012, Messi went on to surpass Gerd Mueller's 40-year-old mark of 85 goals, the most scored in a calendar year. He scored 91 goals in all competitions and was the first player to receive the FIFA Ballon d'Or four times. Many believed there was nothing more he could do to prove he was the best player in the world. He delivered a heart-felt acceptance speech many felt proved his humble spirit: "To tell you the truth, this is really quite unbelievable," he said at the awards ceremony in the Swiss city of Zurich. "The fourth award that I have had is just too great for words. I would like to recognize my other colleagues from Barcelona: Iniesta, it has been great to train and play alongside you. I would also like to recognize all of my friends in the Argentinian national team. Everyone that has worked with me coaches and staff and my family and my friends. Also my wife and my son. Thank you." He signed a new contract with Barcelona in 2012 which extended through 2016.

Messi would later say that his crowning achievement of the year was the birth



of his son, Thiago, on November 2, 2012. Thiago was born in Barcelona and Messi took time from training to attend the birth. He posted on his Facebook page: “Today I am the happiest man in the world, my son was born and thanks to God for this gift! Thanks to my family for the support! A hug to everyone.” He later had Thiago’s name and handprints tattooed on his left calf. As Messi is left footed, Thiago is now a part of every goal.

The 2013–2014 season did not bring the accolades for FC Barcelona they had been enjoying. Messi signed a new contract in February which extended to 2018 with a buyout clause remaining at \$335 million and a net salary of \$14.75 million per year. He would also be wearing the captain’s armband that season for the first time. Barcelona did secure the La Liga title, but the last half of the 2013 season began to fall apart as Vilanova was absent due to illness and Messi began to suffer from injuries again. What was declared by the press as Barcelona’s physical and psychological dependence on Messi came to be termed “Messidependencia” that season. Even when he was injured, Messi seemed to change the spirit of what appeared to be a lost team when he was on the pitch.

Despite suffering perpetual injury, Messi was intent on continuing to break records. He set a world record for the longest streak of goals scored in consecutive games with 21. He was the first player to be a three-time award winner of the European Golden Shoe. He did relinquish his reign on the FIFA Ballon d’Or to Cristiano Ronaldo, and it was the first season in five years that FC Barcelona would finish without a trophy. Speculation abounded about whether Messi would stay in Barcelona, but it was answered with a new contract in May 2014 that made him the highest-paid player the sport had ever seen. He was would receive an increased salary of €20 million.

In 2014, Barcelona had a new manager, Luis Enrique, and Messi was continuing to break records. In the last part of the year, he broke three major world records by becoming top scorer in La Liga, the Champions League, and in the Derbi Barceloní. He closed 2014 as the runner-up once again for the FIFA Ballon d’Or behind Cristiano Ronaldo. It was a year which left the world wondering whether he had set records that even he could not surpass. Perhaps, he had hit his ceiling.

The beginning of 2015 looked bleak for Barcelona, but it found renewed

spirit in the trio of Lionel Messi, Luis Suárez, and Neymar who, together, set a Spanish football record with 122 goals. The last kick secured Barcelona's fifth European Cup which was added to their La Liga and the Copa del Rey titles to complete a treble. It was Barcelona's second treble in six years and fourth European Cup in ten years. They were the first club in history to win the league, domestic cup, and European cup twice. Messi continued to rack up individual records and awards as well. On March 8th, he became the player with the most hat-tricks in Spanish football. His first goal in the Copa del Rey on May 30th was so spectacular that it has been nominated for the 2015 FIFA Puskás Award. Another goal in the Champions League became the most tweeted sports moment of the year. In August, Messi was awarded the UEFA Best Player in Europe Award over Cristiano Ronaldo.

On September 11, 2015, Messi and his partner Antonella Roccuzzo welcomed their second son Mateo. Messi only missed one day of training to be with Antonella during the birth. To commemorate Mateo's birth, Messi had his name and birth date embroidered on his new Adidas boots.

Messi suffered an injury to his left knee in September which kept him out of play until November. On December 20, a goal by Messi in the 36th minute and a double from Luis Suárez in the second half helped Barcelona to beat River Plate 3–0 in Yokohama and win the 2015 FIFA Club World Cup, the club's fifth trophy of 2015. Barcelona's trio has become arguably the best in soccer history and definitely the best in Barcelona's history with 176 goals scored together in 2015. All three were nominated for the 2015 Ballon d'Or. On January 11, 2016, it was announced that Lionel Messi had won his fifth Ballon d'Or.

# Chapter 5: National Play

National victories have eluded Argentina for more than twenty-two years now. Messi's individual awards as a part of his home team have been impressive, but he is yet to lead them to a title, which has earned him some disfavor in Argentina. His first appearance in a World Cup, in 2006 when he was only 19 years old, was a disappointment for him and his compatriots. He saw very little playing time during the tournament where he only made brief appearances as a substitute. Fans blamed coach José Pékerman for benching Messi when Argentina was eliminated by Germany in the quarter-finals. They faced the same fate at the World Cup again in 2010. With Diego Maradona as coach and Lionel Messi, notably the best player in world, Argentina was favored to win all, but history repeated itself and they were surprisingly eliminated in the quarter-finals by Germany. Messi did face criticism this time as many declared he cared more for his club in Barcelona than his own country. They felt he was proving himself a superstar athlete and winning titles for Barcelona while leaving his own country trophy-less.

Argentina did not fare any better in the Copa América in 2007 or 2011. In 2007, a Brazilian team that was missing its star players beat Argentina in the finals. Messi was still a very young player, and the 2008 Olympics were looming with promise, so he escaped much of the criticism. But, in 2011, the country was hungry for a title and with the best player in the world, they were confident it was their year. Maradona had been replaced by Sergio Batista, who had brought them Olympic gold in 2008. Fate was not in their favor, however, and 2011 brought disappointment again when Argentina lost in a shoot-out in the quarter-finals to the tournament victors, Uruguay. This loss followed the 2010 World Cup disappointment and put Messi in great disfavor with his home country.

Added to their many disappointments was the fact that Argentina failed to qualify for the 2012 Olympics where they should have been defending the gold. Winning the gold in 2008 and 2012 had been their only consolation, so not even *qualifying* to participate in the games was an embarrassment. At matches, Messi found himself proclaimed the greatest player in the world everywhere else while he suffered boos and jeers from his own countrymen.

In August 2011, Alejandro Sabella replaced Batista, and Messi thrived with his national team under new leadership. He took on the captaincy of the national team and seemed to mesh with his teammates for the first time in years. He scored his first World Cup goal ever against Bosnia-Herzegovina in the first official match of the 2014 World Cup tournament. Messi led Argentina as they advanced to the finals where they faced Germany in a battle referred to as the best team in the world against the best player in the world. The best player once again failed to bring his country the Cup. Germany won 1–0, but Messi fought hard.

His record of the most throughballs and dribbling runs in the tournament were noted when he received the Golden Ball, awarding him as the best player of the tournament, even though Argentina had come up short. The award was controversial because many felt that Messi didn't deserve it and speculated that Adidas, who sponsored it, had pressured the committee to support their endorser. Many Argentinians felt that Messi was once again playing for his individual gain rather than for his country. He apparently felt the stress of the situation because he appeared embarrassed on the podium when he received the award.

Messi would have another chance to bring Argentina a trophy in the summer of 2015 at the Copa América. And, once again, he led Argentina to the finals where they faced Chile. In a scrappy, sometimes hostile match, Chile won 4–1 in a penalty shootout after an 0–0 extra-time draw. Messi finished the tournament with one goal and three assists in six games. He reportedly told officials not to award him the trophy as the best player in the tournament as he would not accept it. It was noted that tournament organizers removed it from the podium and did not award it to any player. He apparently did not want to inflict the shame of the World Cup scenario on himself or his country again. He later posted on his Facebook page: "There's nothing more painful in football than losing a final. But I don't want to leave it any longer to say thank you to everyone who has always supported us and continued to during the tough moments."

So it seems the greatest player in the world still has much to prove to his home country. Argentina has qualified for the 2016 Olympic games, but it has not been confirmed that Messi will be named a member of the squad. He

has said in various interviews that he will continue to play for the national team whenever they call. Olympic rules for men's soccer limit teams to 3 players over 23 years old, and it is almost certain Argentina will use Messi for one of its slots. Whether Barcelona will balk over releasing him for Olympic play is certain to be a factor as well.

# Chapter 6: Personal Life

Set aside Lionel Messi's soccer accolades and you will still find an impressive array of accomplishments. Twice voted one of *Time Magazine's* "Time 100" as one of the most influential people in the world, he has reached children all over the globe with his charity work. The Lionel Messi Foundation was formed in 2007 with its mission to help children everywhere who are in need of better education and healthcare. Messi has poured millions of his own into the foundation and has secured sponsorships from his endorsers and other contacts. The foundation has an education outreach program which focuses on teaching children to maintain a healthy lifestyle no matter what their environment. A major fundraiser for the foundation is the "Messi and Friends" exhibition soccer games held all over the world.

Another aspect of the foundation is Messi's work with UNICEF. He was named a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador in March 2010 for his participation in UNICEF's efforts to make sure children worldwide have enough to eat, immunization against diseases, clean water to drink, and a decent education. Messi's work has included disaster relief, HIV/AIDS awareness, immunization awareness, and much more. He has stated that the birth of his own children has made him feel even more deeply the need for every child to have a happy and healthy childhood. He celebrated his first son Thiago's first birthday as a UNICEF event to spread awareness and raise funds. It promoted the hashtag #lastchild1st, the initiative to reach children in the farthest most impoverished parts of the world who are in need of proper healthcare and education.

Messi has also given millions of dollars to promote youth football in Argentina. He has made appearances at charitable events worldwide to encourage youth to pursue athletic goals. He has helped build facilities in Argentina and other places to house and promote youth football as well as sponsoring individual players worldwide. Wherever he travels in the world to play, he is often spotted taking time to interact with the area's children and youth.

Messi's accomplishments have made him one of the most marketable figures

in the world, and that persona has made him and his charities millions in endorsements. The majority of Lionel Messi's wealth can be attributed to endorsements. His long-term contract with Adidas is said to be worth millions alone. He also has contracts with Pepsi, Turkish Airlines, Dolce & Gabbana, Gillett, and most recently Tata Motors. You'll also find his face on the cover of *FIFA 13–FIFA 16*. You'll also find those endorsers listed on the "Partners" page of his *Lionel Messi Foundation* website, [fundacionleomessi.org](http://fundacionleomessi.org). They donate millions to his world-wide charity efforts.

Messi might show off a winning personality for his endorsers, but fans often criticize him for being too cool and aloof. He shies from the media's spotlight and keeps his personal life private. He's often viewed as dispassionate and boring. In Argentina especially, he is described as mechanical and too pragmatic. There is so little published about his personal life that fans expect to see more charisma on the field, which particularly aggravates Argentinians who believe he is not patriotic enough and doesn't show enough passion for his country's team.

Oddly, another source of criticism is Messi's fashion choices. He may work magic on the pitch, but his sartorial choices leave the public and paparazzi confused sometimes. He's usually casually dressed in jeans and t-shirts, but when it comes to awards ceremonies or anywhere on a red carpet and he's probably doing something flashy that seems entirely uncharacteristic. A hot topic at the Ballon d'Or has become "What will Messi wear?" He's made some eccentric suit choices in past years which have left the media gape-mouthed and social media blowing up with jabs at his unorthodox fashion sense. Dolce & Gabbana has dressed him in shiny maroon and red velvet, polka-dots, and flowers for the prestigious event. And, then when he does try to tone it down, he's criticized for looking doltish and boring again. He might not stir up much controversy elsewhere in the press, but those following his celebrity style choices have plenty to say about him.

The Messi family's attempts to remain low-key and private are impressive, but when you are the best soccer player in the world who rarely feeds the media any sensationalism, every part of your life will be susceptible to ridicule. Messi has remained for several years on the list of the top five



wealthiest athletes in the world. No matter how much of his incredible wealth he gives away to charitable organizations, any misuse of finances is going to bear scrutiny. So, Messi and his father have been the target of investigations and criminal charges from the Spanish government that started in 2013 due to what has been dubbed tax evasion.

A state prosecutor opened an investigation of Messi's tax return filings in 2007 and 2009. The Spanish tax agency is alleging that Jorge Messi and Lionel Messi defrauded the government by using offshore companies in Belize and Uruguay to shield Lionel's earnings from advertising with endorsers including Banco Sabadell, Danone, Adidas, Pepsi-Cola, Procter and Gamble, the Kuwait Food Company, and possibly others. The Messis are accused of three counts of tax fraud which include defrauding the tax agency of \$4.5 million dollars. Jorge Messi is definitely going to trial and prosecutors are asking for a maximum 22-month jail sentence in addition to fines.

Jorge Messi has taken responsibility for the situation and adamantly denied that either of them intentionally committed any fraud. Messi claims his father and financial advisors had complete control of his finances and he knew nothing about any of the matters. Jorge Messi is taking the entire blame by claiming that he and Lionel were duped by unethical financial advisors. In 2013, Messi paid the approximate \$5 million dollars that is allegedly owed including back interest, but prosecutors are still calling foul and not readily granting impunity.

Most current reports state that Messi has been cleared of the charges, but different rulings and appeals have made the case confusing and uncertain. Some reports still indicate that the Spanish legal service is refusing to drop its charges against Lionel. He will almost certainly be required to testify in court at the very least, but even if charges are again forthcoming for him, it would be very doubtful he would face any jail time. It does, however, seem less likely that Jorge will be able to so easily shrug the charges.

The initial tax fraud investigation has spawned others which are mostly related to Messi's charities, but none of the investigations has produced any charges and all have been dropped so far. One of the most damaging rumors and investigations for the star is the ongoing case with Drug Enforcement

Agencies in Mexico and America which allege a money laundering scheme involving Mexican and Columbian drug cartels. Witnesses have come forth to claim that some of the friendly charity matches Lionel Messi's foundation organizes and produces as the "Messi and Friends Tour" were actually a safe haven for drug money. Testimonies indicate that money raised went to drug cartels instead of its intended charities who pledge help to impoverished children around the world. Messi has not commented on the situation and the investigation is ongoing.

Controversy always lingers in the shadows of his career about whether he is on the verge of leaving FC Barcelona or not. The most recent ones involving contract issues with his high-profile teammates seem the most credible so far. Rumors that Neymar had been brought to replace him and that the club was trying to keep him from learning that Neymar had been granted a higher salary were certainly sources of irritation for him. Recently, those rumors have seemed to have more merit as it has been discovered that even though Neymar's salary is not as high, he and his father may have received bonuses which cut deeply into FC Barcelona revenues. The question has become about which player they can afford to keep, and if Messi should move to greener pastures before it is too late in his career. For now, neither the club directors nor players have much to say about the situation publicly. Messi's only comment is that he is happy with his current situation and is living in the moment.

So, what's next for the man who seems to already have accomplished it all? He says he is enjoying being a father and, by all reports, spends much of his free time doting over his two sons and his long-time partner Antonella Roccuzzo. He says they have grounded him and are teaching him that there is more to life than football. He is certainly staying busy and Barcelona is counting on another stellar record-breaking season to come, while the Argentinians are still looking to him to bring home trophies from the 2016 Olympics in Brazil. Oh, and there is that ever-elusive World Cup overshadowing all the glory so far. It's probably haunting no one more than Messi, himself. Can the superstar who will be in the autumn of his career finally be the savior for his home country and break their 25-year trophy drought? The world will be watching.

# About the Author

Benjamin Southerland is a lifelong Chicagoland resident. Southerland developed a strong interest for politics and government during his college years through his study of leaders who have shaped history, such as Winston Churchill, Napoleon, and Thomas Jefferson. Southerland is also interested in individuals who have impacted the world of sports and entertainment. He has studied and written about politicians, world leaders, athletes, and celebrities. He researches these fascinating figures extensively in order to determine what has shaped their worldviews and contributed to their success. He aims for his books to give readers a deep understanding of the achievements, inspirations, and goals of the world's most influential individuals. Follow Benjamin Southerland at his website [benjaminsoutherland.com](http://benjaminsoutherland.com) to learn about his latest books.