



Messi denied **dream** farewell

Spain defeats ten-man Argentina in extra-time to win the World Cup

● **Messi left in tears after loss**

● **Fernandez sees red in late stoppage time**

● **Argentina struggles to create scoring opportunities**

● **Messi touches ball only 54 times**

● **Spain dominates tense physical encounter**

AFP | East Rutherford

Lionel Messi could have ended all debate over who is the greatest player of all time by winning another World Cup with Argentina, but he was left in tears following Spain's 1-0 win.

Messi, now 39, dragged the holders to another final, scoring eight goals and also providing two assists in the dramatic late comeback against England in the semi-finals.

But the dream of lifting the trophy again, four years after he inspired Argentina to victory in Qatar, ultimately proved too good to be true.

Ten-man Argentina did not lay a glove on Spain at the MetLife Stadium, and were lucky to survive until the 106th minute, when Ferran Torres finally broke the deadlock.

3
World Cup finals feature Lionel Messi, matching the historic milestone record set by Brazil legend Cafu

The blunt South Americans struggled throughout the match and faced a huge challenge when Enzo Fernandez was sent off in stoppage time.

The final passed Messi by, and as he broke down in tears it was easy to think that he might have been much better off bowing out on that glorious night in Doha in 2022.

That victory allowed him to emulate Diego Maradona, who dragged Argentina to glory in 1986. But this time he emulated his legendary predecessor in a different way.

Maradona's Argentina returned to the final as holders in 1990, only to deliver a dreadful, cynical display in losing 1-0 to West Germany, a game they finished with nine men.

They fouled their way through this game too, appearing to have no tactic other than to try to get under Spain's skin.

Messi touched the ball only

54 times, with almost half of those coming in extra-time, and never looked like scoring the goal that would allow him to equal Kylian Mbappe's overall World Cup record tally of 22.

Equalling Cafu

It was hard not to come to the

conclusion that he ended up hindering his side once they were down to 10 men -- he was left as their lone forward, when in any other circumstances coach Lionel Scaloni would surely have sent on the fresh legs of Lautaro Martinez in attack.

Argentina failed



Messi's final was played at the same MetLife Stadium where he dramatically announced his international retirement in 2016 before his remarkable late-career revival

to become the first team to retain the World Cup since Brazil in 1962, but this was still a momentous day for Messi.

He became only the second player to appear in three World Cup finals, matching the achievement of Brazil great Cafu.

Pele won three World Cups, but did not play in the 1962 final due to injury. Maradona played in two finals.

If Messi does still have any doubters, they may point to the fact that he has now lost two of his finals, with this defeat following the loss to Germany in 2014.

The final took place back at the same stadium where he sensationally announced his retirement from international football aged 29 in 2016.

He had won more than 100 caps by then, and was already regarded as one of the greatest players of all time thanks to his achievements with Barcelona.

A game too far

But with Argentina he had already lost three major finals, including the 2014 World Cup final, when he came to the MetLife Stadium for the Copa America Centenario decider against Chile in 2016.

The game ended 0-0, before Messi missed his penalty in the shootout as Argentina lost again. "For me the national team is over," he said then.

He went on to enjoy an incredible late career revival with his country, winning the Copa America back-to-back in 2021 and 2024, either side of the 2022 World Cup.

The 2026 tournament in North America felt at first like a victory lap for Messi, as he scored a hat-trick in the opening game against Algeria and the goals kept flowing.

He now has more than 200 caps, and has played a record 34 World Cup games across a joint-record six tournaments.

Surely this will bring the curtain down on his World Cup career, given he will be into his 40s in 2030.

There may, however, be calls for him to keep playing for his country a little longer, especially as he has a contract with Inter Miami until 2028.

It has been a glorious career, but the final was a game too far for Messi and Argentina.

We have grown together, says Spain coach de la Fuente



Luis de la Fuente, Head Coach of Spain, holds the trophy

AFP | East Rutherford

An emotional Spain coach Luis de la Fuente spoke of his pride in his players after they won the second World Cup in the country's history.

"I feel especially proud of this generation of footballers who have grown with this idea... giving us an example of a group, of a family," he said.

"They are players with exceptional talent. For me, it has been an honour to have accompanied them on this journey."

De la Fuente, who also coached them to the Euro 2024 crown, added: "I'm very emotional, looking back. We have won everything, and that

is wonderful.

"They are a generation of footballers who are a source of pride for Spain. Together, we are stronger."

The 65-year-old coach said he believed Spain should have won the game earlier than the 106th minute goal by Ferran Torres that settled a tense final, but he praised Argentina 'keeper Emi Martinez for an inspired performance.

"I think the game should have been decided earlier. Di-bu's great saves prevented us from winning sooner, but it is a World Cup final and, even with ten players at the end, you have to suffer," de la Fuente said.

Spain deserved to win: Argentina's Scaloni

AFP | East Rutherford

Argentina coach Lionel Scaloni admitted Spain were the better team following his team's defeat.

The South American champions, led by Lionel Messi, had been seeking to become the first team since 1962 to win back-to-back World Cups.

"They were the better side -- that's the truth -- but I'll cherish the memory of them (his team), of what they achieved, and of the value of making it this far," said Scaloni, who later broke down in tears at his post-game press conference.

"We have to place immense value on this because it takes so much effort."

Scaloni, who had to break up an ugly skirmish after the final whistle that involved Argentina midfielder Leandro Paredes, said his team must accept defeat with the same grace they had shown when celebrating recent successes.

"We are gracious in victory, and we must be gracious in defeat. Today, we are showing that we know how to lose," he said.

"We lost the match and we accept it, but that doesn't mean we stop living or forget everything we did to get here."

He thanked the fans for their incredible support throughout the 2026 tournament in Canada, Mexico and the United



Argentina's head coach Lionel Scaloni (C,R) clashes with Spain's defender #04 Eric Garcia at the end of the match

States.

"To the people, my players, and the country, I want to say that we gave it our all," he said.

"We arrived here facing a realistic situation, but if the players leave everything on the pitch, as they did today, it sets a great example for our people and our country."

"We have to pick ourselves up again, there is no other way," he added.

Scaloni, 48, said Argentina's achievement in reaching a second successive final should be appreciated.

"I certainly value the runners-up spot because it takes so much to get here, and I think it deserves huge recognition,"



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LIONEL SCALONI

he said.

"Naturally, we would have liked to win, but ultimately I feel gratitude. That is the only word I have, along with sadness, of course."

"But when you give everything like that, regardless of whether you play well or poorly, it's very

hard to find fault."

Scaloni later cast doubt on his long-term future as Argentina coach, suggesting he may choose to step down when his existing contract ends in December.

Reports in Argentina have said he has already reached a verbal agreement to continue through to the 2030 World Cup.

"I already have an idea of what I want to do," he said. "I will honor the contract and then see."

"I feel the need to think, because I don't know if it's possible to achieve something as big as this," Scaloni added at his press conference, before breaking down in tears.