

Arrogance or pride? Argentina grapples with World Cup villain label

Defeated finalists face global backlash over aggressive pitch tactics and post-match antics

● Critics blast Argentina for dirty tactics

● Fans defend passionate football style

● Final marked by fouls and brawls

● Racism claims target supporters

AFP | Buenos Aires

Critics blasted Argentina for dirty tactics and poor sportsmanship during their 1-0 loss to Spain, cementing the country's status as World Cup villain that grew throughout the tournament.

But Argentines argue they are just passionate and misunderstood.

"I think we deserve some credit for not being very well-liked, because of this tendency to be arrogant and look down on most people from a pedestal," said Leo Simone, 55, a lawyer, from his home north of Buenos Aires.

"They confuse arrogance with pride," his wife chimed in, preferring not to give her name.

While star Lionel Messi is beloved around the world, anti-Argentina sentiment grew as critics argued they were FIFA's darling and received favorable referee calls such as penalties and cards shown to opponents.

Then came the final, replete with fouls, brawls on the pitch, and the Argentine squad turning their backs when Spain received the World Cup trophy.

The New York Times called it a "tetchy, petulant and distasteful performance."

Former Germany player



Argentina's forward #10 Lionel Messi leaves the pitch after the match

Thomas Hitzlsperger wrote on X that the team were "disgusting sportsmen" and British television personality Piers Morgan said "they basically just went around whacking as many Spanish players as they could."

Near Ezeiza Airport, where thousands of fans welcomed the players returning to Buenos Aires on Monday night, Maximiliano Heredia, a 35-year-old construction worker, said: "We've always been criticized, we're used to it. But we always give it our all."

'We love it'

Many Argentines online wore the criticism as a badge of honor. "There's something about Argentine irreverence that they can't tolerate. Our rebelliousness irritates them, enrages them... they call us cocky, cheaters, dirty. And we love it, it fills us with pride," journalist Pedro



Despite international outrage over players turning their backs during Spain's trophy presentation, many Argentine fans and local commentators wear the global criticism as a badge of honor and pride

Rosemblat wrote on his Instagram.

Sports journalist Ezequiel Fernandez Moores told AFP that some criticism was justified: "Sometimes we think we're the

center of the universe, that God and our own navel are Argentine."

He said local football codes of provocation, mockery, and boasting did not translate to a global audience.

"We can't expect the world to understand us, our way of being, feeling, and expressing ourselves," he said.

Nevertheless, the team turning their backs on Spain as they received the cup was "not right," he said.

The lawyer Simone rejects the notion that physical play makes Argentina a violent team.

"Argentina is a team that fights hard, like almost all South American football, but Spain also resorted to tactical fouls," he said.

"It's football: if you don't like being hit, play volleyball."

For Evelio Rubio, a 47-year-old Venezuelan neurologist who has lived in Argentina for a decade,

Messi says pain is 'immense' after World Cup final defeat

Lionel Messi has spoken publicly for the first time since Argentina's defeat in the World Cup final, saying the pain of the loss was "immense" while leaving his international future uncertain.

"The pain is immense, and this wound will take time to heal," the 39-year-old wrote on Instagram on Monday, a day after Argentina's 1-0 extra-time defeat to new world champions Spain.

The Argentina captain had left the stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey, without speaking to reporters after Sunday's final. The expanded tournament in North America was the sixth World Cup of Messi's career with Argentina, and many interpreted his tears after the match as a possible farewell to the national team.

"It is hard to fully appreciate our achievement right now, but

this group reached two consecutive World Cup finals," Messi wrote, without addressing whether he intends to continue playing for Argentina.

The next World Cup will be held in 2030, with one of the matches scheduled to take place in Buenos Aires. Messi would be just short of his 43rd birthday when the tournament begins.

Alongside his message, Messi posted a photograph of himself wearing his runners-up medal.

"Thank you from the bottom of my heart for every greeting and message. Once again, we managed to unite as a country and stand together, sharing the immense pride of being Argentine," he wrote.

Messi also congratulated Spain, where he spent much of his club career, on winning its second World Cup title after its triumph in 2010.

it is impossible to understand from outside how "football is experienced here."

For a Venezuelan accustomed to his national team not winning titles, experiencing that passion from within "is spectacular."

Racism accusations

Argentine fans and some players have also faced accusations of racism -- such as a chant sung by the team in the past mocking the Black players on the French team as not being really French.

There is also a long history of club-level fans throwing bananas on the field or making monkey gestures at Brazilian fans or black players.

During this World Cup, FIFA condemned racism in a statement after an Argentine sup-

porter told a Black US influencer known as IShowSpeed to go "cry at the zoo" during a livestream.

American actor Samuel L. Jackson stirred controversy when he urged black people in an Instagram story not to support Argentina which he dubbed one of "the most racist countries in the world."

Sociologist Ivan Schuliaquer of the National University of San Martin said people should not take racism related to football and apply it generally to Argentine society and history.

This racism exists and should not be denied, he said.

"But, in many cases, these labels come from colonizing countries that have not yet fully resolved the issue of racism."

La Liga chief says FIFA 'destroying football industry'

AFP | Madrid

The president of the Spanish football league, Javier Tebas, accused FIFA of acting "irresponsibly" following the announcement of discussions regarding a possible 64-team World Cup in 2030, in an interview with an Italian sports daily published yesterday.

Tebas also said that FIFA president Gianni Infantino's time was "over", telling La Gazzetta dello Sport that there is a "system that is fundamentally flawed", which has allowed him to lead football's global governing body for a decade.

"The football industry is not just about the World Cup, however important it may be," he said.

"They are destroying the football industry -- which generates tens of thousands of jobs



Javier Tebas

-- for an event that lasts 40 days and involves only a minority of players."

At the World Cup opening ceremony in June, Infantino mentioned "discussions about expanding to 64 teams" for the World Cup's centenary in 2030, which will be co-hosted primarily by Spain, Portugal and Morocco, with Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina also welcoming some matches.

We need fewer national teams and better protection for domestic football at all levels. They don't realize this and are making decisions irresponsibly

JAVIER TEBAS

"We have repeatedly expressed our concerns about the competition calendar. And now they want to organize a 64-team World Cup," Tebas added, emphasizing that "it is the domestic leagues that keep this sport alive".

"We need fewer national teams and better protection for domestic football at all levels. They don't realize this and are making decisions irresponsibly," Tebas added.

Former Man Utd boss Ferguson salutes old rival Keegan

AFP | London

Former Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson has saluted Kevin Keegan for building Newcastle's "greatest team" following his old rival's death aged 75.

Keegan passed away on Monday after battling cancer, with Ferguson joining the tributes for one of football's most endearing characters.

Ferguson and Keegan were involved a fierce battle for Premier League supremacy, with United famously pipping Newcastle to the title in 1996.

Frustrated by Ferguson's comments in the media towards the end of that tense title fight, Keegan memorably ranted at the Scot in a iconic television interview.

But despite that row, Ferguson remained friendly with former Liverpool and



Newcastle boss Kevin Keegan (left) and Manchester United counterpart Sir Alex Ferguson (file photo)

England striker Keegan, who earned his admiration with an impressive rebuilding job at Newcastle.

The Magpies were in danger of relegation to the third tier when Keegan took over, but he saved them from relegation be-

fore winning promotion to the Premier League in 1993.

Keegan made Newcastle so dynamic that they were dubbed "the entertainers" for an eye-catching style that pushed Ferguson's team all the way in the title race.