

Back-to-back World Cup titles a 'dream' for Argentina, says Tagliafico

Argentina seek to become first nation since Brazil 1962 to retain World Cup

● Argentina last won back-to-back World Cups in 1962

● Brazil (1958, 1962) and Italy (1934, 1938) only repeat champions

● Messi says this will be his sixth and final World Cup

AFP | Lyon

Argentina full-back Nicolas Tagliafico says becoming the first team to successfully defend the World Cup title in 64 years would be a "dream" for the three-time world champions.

The South American giants are among the favourites for this year's tournament in the United States, Mexico and Canada, after winning the title in Qatar four years ago, inspired by Lionel Messi.

The 38-year-old Messi has said this will be his sixth and final World Cup but Argentina have been in strong form heading into the finals, finishing top of the South American qualifying standings.

The last nation to win back-to-back World Cups was Pele's Brazil in 1958 and 1962, following in the footsteps of Italy who won the second and third editions of the global showpiece in 1934 and 1938.



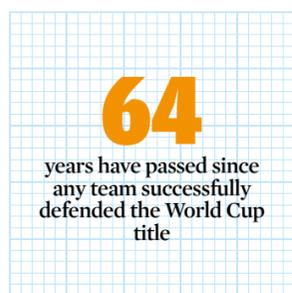
Nicolas Tagliafico, Nicolas Otamendi and Lionel Messi of Argentina walk out the pitch after a match (file photo)

"Only Brazil and Italy have won two consecutive World Cups, but that was a long time ago," Tagliafico told AFP.

"It's a dream, like our dream of winning one, but we have to focus on the day-to-day, one match at a time, without getting carried away, because in the end, it's the daily work that will pay off."

'Enthusiasm'

Argentina still have largely the same squad which won the title in Qatar four years ago, although



some younger players have recently broken into the side.

Como rising star Nicolas Paz, Bournemouth defender Marcos Senesi and Strasbourg's Valentin Barco are among the new faces hoping to feature at the World Cup.

Barco's club teammate Joaquin Panichelli, the leading scorer in France's Ligue 1 this season, was also expected to play a part at the World Cup but that now looks doubtful after he suffered a knee injury in training Thursday.

Media reports suggest he has



Lyon defender Tagliafico highlighted the tournament's massive expansion to 48 teams across three countries, warning even champions could exit in the round of 32



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NICOLAS TAGLIAFICO

nothing has been discussed regarding the overall organisation," he added.

"We know we'll be in Kansas City (base camp), but apart from that, we know nothing..."

"Furthermore, there's another crucial match, and we could have the misfortune, in the round of 32, for some unfortunate detail to eliminate us.

"It's a different World Cup, with many more teams, and I think it will be even more competitive."

Argentina face Mauritius in a friendly later yesterday, before continuing their World Cup preparations against Zambia on Tuesday.

They were originally due to face European champions Spain in the Finalissima in Doha, but that game was cancelled due to the United States' and Israel's war on Iran.

Their title defence starts on June 16 against Algeria in Kansas City before moving on to Arlington where they will face Austria and Jordan.

torn his ACL and, with only three months to go before the start of the World Cup, is now likely to miss the tournament.

"I think there's a mix of young players, perhaps less experienced, but with a lot of enthusiasm and a strong desire to wear the national jersey," said Tagliafico.

"I have a good feeling about this team, even if sometimes it seems like they're relaxing.

"But in competitions like this, the team rediscovers its best form, it gets its motivation back."

Lyon's Tagliafico is also aware that this year's expanded 48-team tournament across an entire continent will be a different beast to the World Cup Argentina won in Qatar, where every match was played within or near Doha.

"From travel to training and match venues, the truth is that

Klopp hails Salah as one of Liverpool's 'all-time greats'

AFP | London

Jurgen Klopp believes Mohamed Salah will leave Liverpool as one of the "all-time greats", with his "unmatched numbers" likely to prove tough to top for future generations at Anfield.

Egypt forward Salah announced on Tuesday he would bring the curtain down on a brilliant nine years with Liverpool at the end of the season.

The 33-year-old arrived from Roma in 2017 and has made 435 appearances for Liverpool to date, scoring 255 goals to be third on the club's list of all-time goalscorers behind Ian Rush and Roger Hunt.

"In the moment when you work with him, it is the same as every other player: 'You can't lose the ball here, you have to defend here', all these kind of things," Klopp told the Anfield Wrap on Thursday.

"But with the bigger view, it is just ridiculous. Unmatched numbers -- will we be talking in 10 years and someone else has them? (Hugo) Ekitike or whoever. I think it will be really



Liverpool's Egyptian midfielder Mohamed Salah (L) and manager Jurgen Klopp (R) speak ahead of a match (file photo)

difficult (to surpass Salah).

"I think he is one of the all-time greats."

Under Klopp, Salah won the Champions League, Premier League, three domestic cups, the UEFA Super Cup, and the Club World Cup.

The bulk of those trophies came with Salah on the right

of a front three also featuring Brazilian Roberto Firmino and Senegal's Sadio Mane.

Together, the trio scored 338 goals in five seasons.

Salah led the way with 156 of those goals -- 49 more than Mane and 81 ahead of Firmino.

"He (Salah) was part of the best front three in world football

for a long time -- the one with the most numbers. That says something," said Klopp.

"It is not easy to be slightly above the other two guys. They all had their specific skills, but Mo was the one for the final moment. He wanted it more than anybody."

Klopp stunned Liverpool fans two years ago by announcing he would resign at the end of the 2023/24 season after "running out of energy".

He went on to receive an emotional farewell from the Anfield faithful following his last game in charge, at home to Wolves.

Klopp now hopes Salah gets a similar reception come his last game for Liverpool.

"We (Salah and Klopp) texted last night," said the former Reds boss. "I really hope he enjoys the rest of the season. I know Mo will only enjoy it if he is winning football games and scoring."

"I hope on this last matchday you (Liverpool fans) all will have a smile on your face and just be happy and thankful that you were part of one of the most incredible careers we will ever be part of."

Bolivia beat Suriname 2-1 to advance in World Cup playoffs

AFP | Monterrey

Bolivia produced a second-half fightback to shatter Suriname's unlikely dream of World Cup qualification with a 2-1 victory in their FIFA playoff game in Mexico on Thursday.

A 79th-minute penalty from Santos striker Miguel Terceros following an equalizer from teenage substitute Moises Paniagua fired Bolivia into a winner-take-all final playoff against Iraq next Tuesday.

Suriname, who had been bidding to become the lowest ranked team in history to qualify for the World Cup, had taken the lead in the 48th minute when Liam van Gelderen bundled home a close-range finish at the BBVA Stadium in Monterrey.

That goal looked like being enough to secure victory for the former Dutch colony, who are ranked 123rd in the world and are made up mostly of players from the Netherlands of Surinamese descent.

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