

# From small boy to football giant

Barcelona's Lionel Messi overcame a growth deficiency to become the biggest football star on the planet, but the Argentinian – who has been crowned World Player of the Year a record four times – is still targeting more success, writes **Gerry Cox**

**W**hen it comes to Lionel Messi, the best way to understand how highly he is regarded in the football world is to think of a number and then double it.

Want to sign him? For Barcelona to even consider selling the Argentinian maestro, the likes of Manchester City, Manchester United or Chelsea would have to fork out something close to his release clause of €250m (US\$275m) – more than double the current transfer record set when Real Madrid signed Gareth Bale from Tottenham Hotspur in 2013.

Wages to go with that? The 28-year-old is heading towards the years generally considered the peak of any footballer's career, and is in such demand that he can ask for a salary that would comfortably double his current deal at Barcelona, where he is reported to earn over €20m (US\$22m) per year. And all of this is before you take account

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of the commercial deals and personal sponsorships that have already made Messi one of the richest sportsmen in history.

Not that money is a motivating factor for him. Messi's sublime natural talents mean he has been in love with the game for as long as he can remember.

"I was four or five [years old] when I joined my first team. Before that, I'd play with my family and friends. So yeah, I was really young when I started," he says. "According to my mom and dad, I was two and kicking a ball around, and by four I was already playing on a team. It's something I've always liked and always done."

He may be barely 5ft 6ins (169cm) tall, but Messi is the biggest star in the world's most popular sport and his otherworldly skills on the football field have so far helped Barcelona to win the Champions League four times, Spain's La Liga seven times, plus the Copa del Rey, UEFA Super Cup and FIFA World Club Cup three times each. He also led Argentina to the World Youth title in 2005 and the 2008 Olympic Games gold medal in Beijing. His long list of achievements – which also include a record four Ballon d'Or trophies for being named the world footballer of the year –

underline just how far Messi has come since he played for Newell's Old Boys in his hometown of Rosario, Argentina, where he scored over 500 goals as a brilliant but tiny schoolboy.

"When I was kid, playing in the streets of Rosario, I'd never have imagined that I'd have reached the level I have and won Ligas, Champions Leagues and other very important titles. I didn't even imagine that I'd be living in Spain, or playing for a professional club as huge as Barcelona, let alone anything else.

"That all seemed a long way away for us as a family, but it's exactly what's happened. It's amazing. I was just thinking about playing football, I just loved the sport. I suppose I thought a bit about becoming a professional, but never for a team like Barcelona."

It was his lack of height and the need for treatment to correct a growth hormone deficiency that led to him moving to Spain to join Barcelona at the age of just 13.

"Barcelona paid for my treatment so I am grateful for that, and I liked them even before joining them. I never thought of going anywhere else, unless perhaps I could finish one day at Newell's Old Boys."

It was there, at the age of ten, that Messi was diagnosed

**Pictured: Lionel Messi's other-worldly talents on the football pitch have made him one of the richest athletes on the planet**

with the hormone deficiency that would cost over €900 (US\$1,000) a month to treat. His family's insurance only covered two years of treatment, and with no Argentinian club prepared to help, he was sent for a trial with Barcelona. The club moved so quickly to snap him up that the very first agreement to sign the small boy who would become the world's most valuable player was written by sporting director Carles Rexach – on a napkin. But moving his family half way around the world was still a big decision for a 13-year-old to make.

"I don't regret it," says Messi. "It was tough because my family and I had to leave behind a lot of things, like our house, our friends in Rosario. But the decision was mine. I did what I had to get to Barcelona."

The move meant Messi was able to continue the hormone treatment successfully until the age of 14, and also to develop his considerable natural talent in the famed Barcelona youth academy, La Masia.

"When I got here, it was a very important step I took, not only for my football career but also on a personal level," he says. "I





have been very grateful for what the club have done for me and the warmth and support I have received. I have developed and grown here at this club. I like this club a lot because, as I said before, it's more than just how they helped and supported me in all the years I have been here."

After impressing coaches and team-mates alike, he made his first-team debut in 2004 at 17, becoming Barcelona's youngest-ever player and proving that leaving Rosario had been the right decision.

"There were a lot of sacrifices," says Messi. "Everything I had to leave behind to get to that point, but it was well worth it."

But while he has enjoyed record-breaking successes in a Barcelona shirt, Messi's exploits on the international stage with Argentina have been far less fruitful. *La Albiceleste* were beaten by Germany in the 2014 FIFA World Cup final – after Messi had missed a simple chance with the game still goalless – and also lost the final of the 2015 Copa America to Chile on penalties.

"Losing the World Cup final was a big, big blow. I wanted to

win it for Argentines everywhere, for my country, and I was very upset afterwards. But being a professional means moving on from low moments quickly.

"If you're on the pitch and you miss a chance, you can't dwell on it – you need to think you are going to score the next one. So yes, losing the World Cup spurs you on to do better, and you want to use the anger and disappointment as motivation."

These so-called failures at international level have led to accusations from some critics that Messi does not care or perform at the same level for his country as his club. Nothing makes him angrier.

"We have not had a good time as a national team but have still been very lucky to play the World Cup final and Copa America final. Yet we hear critics saying bad things about us.

"I also hear people say I don't play for the Argentina shirt, and they question our attitude. In football it is not about playing just with 'balls', we are the ones on the pitch playing with courage and the ones who really want to win trophies. We played two finals. We didn't win, but that's football.

"Against Germany, we lost because we missed the clearest chances in the game, and against Chile it was probably an awful game, again we missed the clearest chances and we lost on penalties.

"I get really angry when everybody says we don't play for the love of the Argentina shirt, or people just say bad things about us. Argentina is my country, my family, my way of expressing myself. I would change all my records to make the people in my country happy."

**'I GET REALLY ANGRY WHEN EVERYBODY SAYS WE DON'T PLAY FOR THE LOVE OF THE ARGENTINA SHIRT. ARGENTINA IS MY COUNTRY. I WOULD CHANGE ALL MY RECORDS TO MAKE THE PEOPLE IN MY COUNTRY HAPPY'**  
**LIONEL MESSI**

His relationship with Argentina's fans is not the only controversial aspect of his career. Last year he and his father Jorge, who manages his affairs, were charged with tax evasion by the Spanish courts – a case that was only dropped in December.

Against this, however, Messi has raised huge sums through charity work, particularly in his role as a UNICEF goodwill ambassador, and has set up the Leo Messi Foundation, working to help disadvantaged children all over the world. Drawing on his own determination to overcome adversity as a small boy, Messi has always made it clear he wants to use his fame and ➤

**Above and below: Messi has faced criticism for failing to replicate his countless Barcelona triumphs while wearing the Argentina shirt**





position as a role model to help future generations.

Away from football and his charity work, Messi is intensely private. He has been in a relationship with childhood friend Antonella Rocuzzo since 2008 and the pair has two sons – Thiago (born in 2012) and Mateo (born in 2015). But despite all his success on the field, football is not a big part of his home life.

“I go home, I say that I have scored two or three goals and [Antonella] doesn’t hear me. I go watch cartoons with Thiago, and she laughs a lot.”

According to Messi, his young family has also transformed his views on the game that has made him a star.

“Before, if I lost or did something wrong, I wouldn’t talk to anyone for three or four days until the madness passed,” he says. “Now if I lose a game, I get home and see my son and it all passes me by. The anger stays on the inside, seeing him changes everything. Being a father has helped me to grow, and I think it is part of maturing. It has helped me not go crazy because of football and to think that there are other things in life as well.”

Despite this attitude, more trophies and more awards seem certain to keep coming his way, given his relentless will to win, borne out of a childhood where he was always smaller than the other kids, including his two older brothers.

“Even when I was a little kid I hated to lose. If I played with my brothers, win or lose, we’d always end up fighting about something. It’s the kind of thing that happens among brothers. But they taught me to hate losing.”

Barcelona are on course for another La Liga title in 2016 and

are hoping to retain their crown as champions of Europe, having sailed through the qualifying group in readiness for a last-16 tie against Arsenal, who tried to sign Messi at the age of 16.

He has tormented the Gunners ever since then, scoring all four goals when Barcelona beat the London side 4-1 in the quarter-final stages in 2010. He and his team-mates will be hoping for a repeat performance this time.

“When you get down to the last eight of the Champions League, no matter which team you draw it’s going to be hard because only the best teams are left, and they can make your life difficult. What will be, will be.”

After finishing his domestic season with Barcelona, Messi then has a chance to make amends with Argentina in the Copa America finals in the United States this summer.

“I have won everything with my club and individually, and of course I want to win everything with Argentina. I think this is going to be a great chance for us to win this tournament because it is different than the other ones, in a different country where the facilities are going to be fantastic, so it’s going to be very special.”

Beyond that, the glaring omission from Messi’s glittering trophy cabinet remains the FIFA World Cup – and he will be aiming to finally add that to his collection in Russia in 2018.

“As a football player, winning the World Cup is the highest achievement. It is something you dream of as a child, and the dream never goes away,” explains Messi. “I’ve asked my Barcelona teammates, [Andres] Iniesta and [Gerard] Pique, how it feels to lift the trophy, but it is something they cannot put into words. We are going to do everything we can to make the dream a reality.”

Having made a habit of turning dreams into reality ever since he was a small boy with big ambitions in Rosario, few would bet against Messi achieving that crowning glory before the curtain comes down on his illustrious career. ■

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**Below: Messi is targeting a Copa America triumph with Argentina in the USA this summer, before setting his sights on World Cup redemption in Russia in 2018**

