



## Argentina have been backed to win the World Cup final by Drake



Lionel Messi is just one game away from immortality as Argentina prepare to collide with France in the World Cup final – but Lionel Scaloni's side could be hampered by the dreaded 'Drake curse'.

The World Cup is the one accolade that has eluded Messi, 35, throughout his illustrious career. The Paris Saint-Germain superstar was a losing finalist back in 2014, so Argentina's talisman will be desperate to make amends in Sunday's showpiece final at Lusail Stadium.

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Drake has garnered a reputation for being a bad-luck charm after backing numerous sporting teams in big events over the years, with the majority of them going on to lose. And after being captured on video throwing his weight behind Messi's side ahead of the World Cup final, quick-witted fans on social media have written off Argentina on the eve of Sunday's seismic showdown.

In a brief clip that has gone viral on social media, Drake, wearing a Napoli shirt, says: "I'll take Argentina, he'll take France. That will be a vibe," to someone off screen, indicating that a wager has been struck ahead of the match.

Drake's own country, Canada, was even struck with the curse when the rapper posed for a picture with star man Alphonso Davies prior to the tournament. John Herdman's side were tipped to be one of the tournament's surprise packages but failed to progress past the group stage, losing all three games.

Various other high-profile sporting stars, including Anthony Joshua, Charles Leclerc and Sergio Aguero, have all suffered crushing defeats in big events shortly after posing for pictures with Drake. Messi will be determined to avoid the curse after admitting that Sunday's showdown will be his final ever World Cup match, meaning it's now or never in terms of realising his life-time goal of lifting the World Cup.

Speaking earlier this week, as quoted by Argentine newspaper Ole, Messi said: "[I am] Very happy to be able to achieve this [reaching the World Cup final]. Ending my World Cup journey by playing my last match in a final. Everything I experienced in this World Cup is something very exciting, what people experienced, how people in Argentina are enjoying it."

When he was asked if he meant Sunday's match would be his final ever World Cup game, Messi clarified: "Yes, surely yes. There are many years for the next one and I don't think it will give me. And ending like this is the best."

A cheesed-off Emiliano Martinez has told Kylian Mbappe that his criticism of South American football wasn't so wise ahead of their seismic World Cup final clash.

France superstar Mbappe made headlines earlier this year by claiming that South America isn't as advanced as his native Europe, prompting criticism from some of the continent's biggest names. "The advantage we have in Europe is that we play among ourselves with high-level matches all the time, such as the Nations League," the Paris Saint-Germain forward declared in May when looking ahead to the tournament in Qatar.

“When we arrive at the World Cup, we are ready, where Brazil and Argentina do not have this level in South America. Football is not as advanced as in Europe. That’s why at the last World Cups, it’s always the Europeans who win.”

Coincidentally, Mbappe’s France will face a South American nation for the first time at the 2022 World Cup in the final – Martinez’s Argentina. And ahead of Sunday’s mouth-watering matchup, the Aston Villa goalkeeper has responded to Mbappe’s inflammatory comments.

“He said that the level of South America is lower than the European level because he did not play there,” Martinez affirmed in a press conference previewing the final. “If you do not have the experience then it is difficult to comment, but nothing was wrong with what he said. They know we are a world class team and they respect us for that.”

The 30-year-old isn’t alone in his stance either, as legendary teammate Lionel Messi – who notably plays alongside Mbappe for PSG – agrees that the South American game is underestimated. “Many times we talked about that in Spain,” Messi told TyC Sports when Mbappe’s comments were broached, having spent two trophy-laden decades experiencing the European game with Barcelona.

“When we returned from a qualifier, we told them, ‘You don’t know how difficult it would be for you to qualify for the World Cup if you had to go there, at altitude, in the heat, in Venezuela’.”

World Cup qualification is indeed a different beast in South America, as 10 nations scrap it out for four automatic places and one intercontinental play-off berth. Whereas in Europe, 55 sides are divided into 10 groups and have a total of 13 World Cup spots up for grabs – taken by the group winners and three teams via the European-only play-offs.

On Sunday, fans are set to see what appear to be the two finest nations from each continent face off at Lusail Stadium, and it’s impossible to pick a clear favourite. France are the holders, who have the know-how from 2018 and enough quality on paper to retain their title as world champions.

Argentina, meanwhile, have Messi – and he’s sometimes all they need. The seven-time Ballon d’Or winner has grabbed the tournament by the scruff of the neck and dragged his teammates through a rollercoaster campaign, having lost their opening match to Saudi Arabia. It would be Messi’s first World Cup, having suffered heartache eight years ago, when Germany beat the Albiceleste in extra-time.

The date is set, the teams have been decided, but anticipation is nowhere to be seen.

The game we are talking about could of course only be the third-place play-off for the 2022 World Cup.

It is a feature of every modern tournament, in fact only two World Cups in the history of the competition have not had a third-place play-off game.

But it is also a match few care about, usually anticipation only grows if a host nation is one of the teams involved. So, to give you a reminder for Saturday's clash between Morocco and Croatia, Mirror Football takes a look at the last five third-place play-offs.

The second third-place play-off England were involved in led to defeat for the Three Lions. Boss Gareth Southgate named a much-changed line-up, but his side quickly fell behind when Thomas Meunier slid in ahead of Danny Rose to divert Nacer Chadli's cross past Jordan Pickford.

The Three Lions did fight back, with Toby Alderweireld clearing an Eric Dier effort off the line, but Eden Hazard wrapped up the win with eight minutes to go. Despite the defeat, Southgate insisted he was proud of his team.

"The players gave everything. They never stopped and showed pride in the shirt. I don't think I could have asked any more of them. It was always a huge task for us. We were playing one of the best three teams in the world," he told talkSPORT.

The last time a host nation featured in the third-place play-off came eight years ago, when Brazil took on the Netherlands. It was a miserable day for the Selecao though, who saw boss Luiz Felipe Scolari booed by the crowd when his name was read out in the wake of the unforgettable 7-1 defeat to Germany in the semi-finals.

They then fell behind after just three minutes when Thiago Silva pulled back Arjen Robben in the box, with Robin van Persie converting the resulting penalty. Just 15 minutes later things went from bad to worse when David Luiz's tame clearance led to Daley Blind firing into the top corner.

Brazil were booed off as they left the pitch at half-time, with the game played at a snail's pace after the break.

Georginio Wijnaldium completed the comprehensive win for the Dutch in stoppage time, with the hosts again jeered at the final whistle.

Undoubtedly a thrilling game, Germany claimed a record fourth win in the third-place play-off against Uruguay in South Africa. Thomas Mueller put the Germans ahead after 18 minutes with a goal that would ultimately earn him the Golden Boot, but Edinson Cavani soon equalised for Uruguay.

Diego Forlan then completed the turnaround with a stunning volley five minutes after half-time. Germany were far from dead and buried though and pulled themselves back into the game when Fernando Muslera failed to claim Jerome Boateng's cross, handing Marcell Jansen an easy finish.

There was still time for more drama, with Germany scoring a third when Sami Khedira nodded in from a corner. Though Forlan hit the bar in the second minute of added time, a goal that would have won him the Golden Boot, there was to be no comeback for Uruguay.

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It was a tournament that sparked renewed success for the Germany national team and they capped it with a win over Portugal to finish third. Both teams named strong line ups, but it was the hosts who dominated, with Bastian Schweinsteiger opening the scoring when he cut in from the left and drilled in a swerving shot.

Schweinsteiger then saw a free-kick sliced into his own net by Armando Petit, before the midfielder sealed the win with a rasping shot from 25 yards. Nuno Gomes scored a late consolation, but it was Germany's day, with assistant boss Joachim Low hailing the party atmosphere.

"It's an indescribable feeling to see the way the people are celebrating this here. It's hard to imagine a bigger party even if we had won the World Cup. We're delighted that we've accomplished what we have against all the resistance," he said.

The 2002 World Cup is legendary for its shocks and two of the biggest were South Korea and Turkey reaching the semi-finals. They faced each other in the third-place play-off, with Turkey winning a classic.

They went ahead after just 10 seconds when Hakan Sukur capitalised on an error to finish smartly. He then set up Ilhan Mansiz twice before the break to hand Turkey total control of the game.

South Korea had pulled one back through Eul-Yong Lee's free-kick from 25 yards out. Though they pushed forward after the break, they were not able to score a second until the final minute of the match through Song Chong-Gug.