

FRIENDS, THE FINAL SHOW OF FOES

The Telegraph
AT THE WORLD CUP



ANGHSUMAN ROY

tween Argentina and Spain, the two finalists of the 2026 World Cup final at MetLife Stadium on Sunday.

Messi, Argentina's inspiration, heaped praises on Lamine Yamal, Spain's 19-year-old new star. "Incredible talent. He plays for the club I love most," Messi would tell his fans at the auditorium.

It's all goodie-goodie. Everyone is saying good things about everyone. Not what you get to see two days before the battle for the game's biggest prize on earth.

Barcelona is the club where Messi made a name for himself, became a monster, devouring every rival on the field, taking the club's merchandising to another level. Barcelona's domination during Messi's stay was otherworldly. Messi became a global phenomenon.

Spain, in fact, wanted Messi to play for La Roja during the period of 2003-2005, but the Argentine never had any doubt where his loyalty stood.

Scaloni, who plied his trade in Spanish clubs Deportivo La Coruna and Mallorca, stays in Mallorca with his family. He has a Spanish wife. The Spanish connection with the cap-

tain and the coach is too glaring to miss.

The regular players of Argentina will face an interesting dilemma. They obey Messi for everything. He loves Barca and Spain. Will they leave him and go for it by themselves? Or will they accord Spain the same respect that Messi gives to his friendly foes?

Four Argentina players, including Julian Alvarez, play for La Liga club Atletico Madrid. But their attachment may not be the same as the figureheads of the national team.

Spain, who bagged the 2024 European Championships with swagger, are unbeaten in 37 matches.

At Friday's news conference on the fifth floor of Javits Centre, Scaloni, De La Fuente and Rodri expressed their mutual respect.

"I really do see two super teams with a lot of similarities in behaviour and in footballing talent," De La Fuente said.

"How could Spain not worry us? They're a great team," was Scaloni's reply to a question about his team's team.

"Regarding Messi, I don't think it's necessary to spell out the kind of player he is or

'IFS' & STATS OF THE BIG MATCH

If Messi scores on Sunday, he will join Vava (1958 & 1962), Pele (1958 & 1970), Paul Breitner (1974 & 1982), Zinedine Zidane (1998 & 2006) and Kylian Mbappe (2018 & 2022) to be among the select few who have scored in two World Cup finals

If Messi scores one goal in the final, he will have three in total, joining Geoff Hurst, Vava, Pele and Zidane. If he scores two, he will tie with Mbappe on a World Cup final aggregate of four goals

If Argentina once again need a comeback to win the final, they will be the first team to do so after West Germany rallied to beat the Netherlands 52 years ago. Italy too came back after being a goal down in 2006, but they won on penalties to be champions

least on the surface.

There is a lot of familiarity between the performances of the two teams, who, according to De La Fuente, are the world's two best sides and are deservedly in the final.

Argentina, since 2021, have won four titles, including two Copa Americas and one World Cup, and are looking for their second successive world crown.

Spain, who bagged the 2024 European Championships with swagger, are unbeaten in 37 matches.

At Friday's news conference on the fifth floor of Javits Centre, Scaloni, De La Fuente and Rodri expressed their mutual respect.

"I really do see two super teams with a lot of similarities in behaviour and in footballing talent," De La Fuente said.

"How could Spain not worry us? They're a great team," was Scaloni's reply to a question about his team's team.

"Regarding Messi, I don't think it's necessary to spell out the kind of player he is or

"On Sunday, not an inch will be yielded," Scaloni promised. But will Argentina be as charged up as they were against England, when at times it looked a brawl could break out between the players? There is a lot to play for. It's a World Cup final, probably Messi's last, but that angst-ridden build-up, or the palpable tension, is not there. It's more relaxed, at

least on the surface.

There is a lot of familiarity between the performances of the two teams, who, according to De La Fuente, are the world's two best sides and are deservedly in the final.

Argentina, since 2021, have won four titles, including two Copa Americas and one World Cup, and are looking for their second successive world crown.

Spain, who bagged the 2024 European Championships with swagger, are unbeaten in 37 matches.

At Friday's news conference on the fifth floor of Javits Centre, Scaloni, De La Fuente and Rodri expressed their mutual respect.

"I really do see two super teams with a lot of similarities in behaviour and in footballing talent," De La Fuente said.

"How could Spain not worry us? They're a great team," was Scaloni's reply to a question about his team's team.

"Regarding Messi, I don't think it's necessary to spell out the kind of player he is or

least on the surface.

There is a lot of familiarity between the performances of the two teams, who, according to De La Fuente, are the world's two best sides and are deservedly in the final.

Argentina, since 2021, have won four titles, including two Copa Americas and one World Cup, and are looking for their second successive world crown.

Spain, who bagged the 2024 European Championships with swagger, are unbeaten in 37 matches.

At Friday's news conference on the fifth floor of Javits Centre, Scaloni, De La Fuente and Rodri expressed their mutual respect.

"I really do see two super teams with a lot of similarities in behaviour and in footballing talent," De La Fuente said.

"How could Spain not worry us? They're a great team," was Scaloni's reply to a question about his team's team.

"Regarding Messi, I don't think it's necessary to spell out the kind of player he is or

least on the surface.

There is a lot of familiarity between the performances of the two teams, who, according to De La Fuente, are the world's two best sides and are deservedly in the final.

Argentina, since 2021, have won four titles, including two Copa Americas and one World Cup, and are looking for their second successive world crown.

Spain, who bagged the 2024 European Championships with swagger, are unbeaten in 37 matches.

At Friday's news conference on the fifth floor of Javits Centre, Scaloni, De La Fuente and Rodri expressed their mutual respect.

"I really do see two super teams with a lot of similarities in behaviour and in footballing talent," De La Fuente said.

"How could Spain not worry us? They're a great team," was Scaloni's reply to a question about his team's team.

"Regarding Messi, I don't think it's necessary to spell out the kind of player he is or



what he means to Argentina," Rodri said.

"I consider him the greatest player of all time, a player who has been able to lead his national team, taking them to win the World Cup in Qatar and now, in this case, to a final.

"However, I believe Argentina are much more than just Messi; they have proven to be a very well-rounded team. So, obviously, we'll have to keep Leo in mind, but plenty of others as well," the Manchester City player observed.

Later, De La Fuente also spoke about his respect for Messi.

Scaloni was asked if he had any special plan to stop Yamal. "How to stop Yamal? Well, I wish I could lock him up in his hotel room," he joked.

On a serious note, he added: "He's a fantastic player, a treasure for football. He's still so very young, with so much more to offer to our game."

Messi has played against Spain three times between 2006 and 2010. In the last meeting, he was at his dominant best, literally toying with the then world champions. In the 4-1 win, he got one.

Sixteen years later, Messi remains his team's go-to man, but Spain, under De La Fuente, has changed.

Monday, 12.30am IST, United Sports Network & Zee5



POSSIBLE
STARTING XIs

Lamine Yamal

New Jersey: The groufie had to wait.

The moment Fifa's monetised interactive session at the Javits Centre in Manhattan on Friday ended, Lionel Scaloni acted deaf to Rio Ferdinand's call for the photo session and walked straight across to the other side of the stage, where Spain coach Luis De La Fuente and Rodri, the captain, were seated.

Scaloni first hugged De La Fuente, then Rodri; warm words were exchanged, and only after that the Argentine went for the groufie.

When the groufie went viral on social media, the frame showed how De La Fuente, who was Scaloni's instructor at the Uefa coaching licence programme, and his Argentine counterpart were engrossed in a discussion, oblivious of the world. That included Novak Djokovic, Kevin Durant and Tom Brady.

It was not any stray moment of bonhomie between

Lionel Messi