



Argentina's World Cup 2026 Squad: Messi Goes for One More, and History

Description

I still remember exactly where I was for the 2022 World Cup final. Crammed into a friend's living room in the small hours, plates of leftover supper everywhere, watching Lionel Messi finally lift the trophy that had eluded him his whole career. Half of Singapore seemed to be awake for it. So when Lionel Scaloni named his Argentina squad for the 2026 World Cup, and Messi's name was once again at the top, I felt that same little flutter of excitement. He is back for one more.

This time Argentina arrive not as hopefuls but as the team everyone wants to beat – the defending world champions, still built around the spine that conquered Qatar. At 39, Messi will become the first man to play in six World Cups, a record that may never be broken. Whatever happens, we are watching the end of something special.

Argentina were drawn in **Group J**, where they face **Algeria** on 16 June, **Austria** on 22 June, and **Jordan** on 27 June. It is a manageable group, and a settled, experienced Argentina side should have more than enough to top it.

Scaloni's Painful Cuts

Scaloni admitted himself that this squad would be – painful for some guys, and so it proved. The biggest shock is the omission of **Franco Mastantuono**, the Real Madrid teenager many expected to be part of the future, who simply could not force his way into an attack overflowing with established stars. There is also no place for **Marcos Acuña**, a World Cup winner in Qatar, while Chelsea's **Alejandro Garnacho** was named in the preliminary squad but missed the final cut.

What it tells you is that Scaloni has stayed loyal to the players who delivered the trophy. Continuity has been the foundation of this golden era, and he was never likely to gamble on unproven names when the core is still performing.



The Full 26-Man Squad

Here is the full list, with current clubs.

Goalkeepers: Emiliano Martínez (Aston Villa), Gerónimo Rulli (Marseille), Juan Musso (Atlético Madrid).

Defenders: Nahuel Molina (Atlético Madrid), Gonzalo Montiel (River Plate), Nicolás Tagliafico (Lyon), Lisandro Martínez (Manchester United), Cristian Romero (Tottenham Hotspur), Nicolás Otamendi (Benfica), Leonardo Balerdi (Marseille), Facundo Medina (Marseille).

Midfielders: Rodrigo De Paul (Inter Miami), Leandro Paredes (Boca Juniors), Enzo Fernández (Chelsea), Alexis Mac Allister (Liverpool), Exequiel Palacios (Bayer Leverkusen), Giovani Lo Celso (Real Betis), Valentín Barco (Strasbourg).

Forwards: Lionel Messi (Inter Miami), Lautaro Martínez (Inter Milan), Julián Álvarez (Atlético Madrid), Nico González (Atlético Madrid), Giuliano Simeone (Atlético Madrid), Thiago Almada (Atlético Madrid), Nico Paz (Como), José Manuel López (Palmeiras).



How They Will Play

Scaloni’s Argentina are not about one rigid system; they are about balance and game management. They can grind out an ugly 1-0 or open up and play with real flair, and that flexibility is exactly what makes them so hard to beat in a knockout tournament. The midfield trio of De Paul, Mac Allister and Enzo Fernández gives them control, bite and creativity all at once.

And then, of course, there is Messi, given a free role to drift and conjure moments out of nothing. The team is built to protect him defensively and feed him in the final third. With Lautaro Martínez and Julián Álvarez offering genuine goal threat ahead of him, Argentina have the rare luxury of world-class finishing to go with their world-class creativity.

The Key Players

Lionel Messi remains the heartbeat, even at 39. His game has evolved – he conserves his energy and picks his moments now – but the magic is undimmed, and his form at Inter Miami suggests he still has plenty left. This is his stage, and his story, and the whole of Argentina will be willing him on for one final run.



Lionel Messi, captain, at a record sixth World Cup. Photo: The White House / Public domain

Lautaro Mart  nez is the centre-forward every team wishes it had. The Inter Milan captain is relentless â?? strong, quick, and a natural finisher â?? and he carries the goalscoring burden that frees Messi to roam. If Argentina are to go deep, Lautaro firing is close to non-negotiable.



Lautaro Mart  nez leads the Argentina line. Photo: Erjonallaraj / CC BY-SA 4.0

Juli  n   lvarez is the man who can do a bit of everything. He scored four goals on the way to glory in Qatar, and since moving to Atl  tico Madrid he has only grown in stature. Whether he starts alongside Lautaro or just off Messi, his work rate and finishing make him one of the first names on Scaloni  s team sheet.



Julián Álvarez, four goals in the Qatar triumph. Photo: Gaetano Gallino / Public domain

The Surprise Package

The name that excites me most is **Nico Paz**. The young Como playmaker has been one of the breakout stars of Serie A, and his inclusion is a rare nod to the next generation in an otherwise veteran squad. He may not start, but if Argentina need a spark of invention off the bench, Paz is exactly the kind of player who can provide it. For a team so reliant on its old guard, he is a glimpse of the future and proof that the production line of Argentine talent never really stops.

My Take

Defending a World Cup is one of the hardest things in football, and the obvious worry for Argentina is age so much of this squad has been together a long time. But experience counts for an enormous amount in tournament football, and few teams know how to win like this one does.

For me, they are firmly among the favourites again. If Messi stays fit and the big names turn up, do not be surprised to see Argentina deep into the knockout rounds once more. And if it really is his last dance, I will once again be wide awake at some unholy hour, cheering him on. Some things are worth losing sleep over.

Follow the Little Big Red Dot World Cup 2026 series as we break down all 48 teams. Next up: Netherlands.

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