

FOCUS ON WINNERS: LIONEL MESSI

World Player of the Year, Lionel Messi of Argentina and Barcelona, was one of the few global football stars to set the 2010 FIFA World Cup alight. Perhaps wearing the lightest boots in the world gave him an extra edge in speed, but being exceptionally gifted must have helped too.

Still unstoppable

It hardly seems fair, but Lionel Messi, World Player of the Year and winner of the 2009–2010 Golden Boot for scoring the most goals during the league season (34 with Barcelona), began Argentina's 2010 FIFA World Cup with a further advantage.

When his country kicked off against Nigeria in its first group game on June 12, the number 10 became the first footballer in the world to wear the new F50 adizero boots—the lightest in the world—in an official match. He played well on the day and his team won 1-0, but there was no Messi goal to celebrate.

In Argentina's next match, a 4-1 victory over South Korea, Lionel Messi again played well, hitting the post, but failed to score. The same thing happened when his country signed off against Greece on June 22, winning the match 2-0 and the group to qualify for the knock-out stages. Even though he failed to find the net, he was the star player, winning the official FIFA Man of the Match award.

Into the knock-out stages and it was his ball through to Carlos Tévez for the first of three goals (to Mexico's one) that caused a heap of controversy; his team-mate was clearly offside, but the Italian match officials missed it and allowed the goal to stand. Argentina sailed into the quarter-final with Lionel Messi still waiting to register his first goal of the tournament, but receiving worldwide acclaim for his excellent play in the first part of the event. He brightened up the World Cup with flair, imagination, skill and speed.

Back at adidas, senior product manager for football footwear, Aubrey Dolan, could have been forgiven for allowing himself a small smile of satisfaction; he was in no doubt that the F50 adizeros would come good for the World Player of the Year. "It's very simple really," he said in the build-up to the event. "Basically this is the lightest and fastest football shoe that we've ever created. We have a simple message if we want

to talk about speed. We've been with the players, professional and amateur, and [the message from them] is very simple: make me faster. As a brand we always want to make players better. At the 2010 World Cup we want to make players faster: first to the ball, fastest with the ball." With the new boot, which weighs 175 grammes (6.173oz) in the leather version, players such as Lionel Messi will feel lighter, he insisted. (In 2008, Nike's Mercurial SL boot weighed in at 180 grammes or 6.349 oz.)

Every second counts

The player agrees. He says there are brief moments in any game, mere seconds perhaps, in which a quick player can make his speed count. "This is important in today's football," he continues, "because the game is now very even, and very hard. So I think that if a player has the chance to be a little quicker than those around him, it's good."

He says the lightness of the boot was the first thing to make an impression on him when he picked the prototypes up. "That was the nicest thing about the boot," he says. "I liked it, even though we set about changing a few small things, a few details after that to improve the boot in time for the World Cup."

European adventure

Born in the city of Rosario in June 1987, Lionel Messi comes over as a polite, modest and still slightly shy young man, rather than as a remote superstar the way many elite athletes do today. His father used to work in a factory and his mother was a part-time cleaner. Young Lionel made an early impression on local club Newell's before being spotted by big city rivals River Plate, from Buenos Aires, as a real talent for the years ahead. However, at the age of 11, the future star had been diagnosed with a growth hormone deficiency and River Plate said it lacked the money (or the belief, perhaps) to pay for treatment costing \$900 a month.

World Player of the Year, Argentina's Lionel Messi, lit up the FIFA 2010 World Cup with sparkling displays of speed, vision and imagination.

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Barcelona team-mates David Villa (left) and Lionel Messi at the launch of the lightest football boot in the world, the adidas F50 adizero.

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High-up members of the coaching staff at Barcelona had also taken note of his talent and invited the boy to travel to Catalonia (accompanied by his father) and, after an impressive trial, offered him a place at its training academy, the medical treatment he needed and a job on the backroom staff of the youth team for his father; at the age of 12, Leo Messi moved to Europe. European football hasn't been the same since.

He made his first-team debut in October 2004 and within a couple of seasons had cemented his inclusion as a first-pick and frequent scorer. By the end of the 2009-2010 season, he had played 214 games for Barcelona and scored 127 goals. Prizes picked up along the way include four Spanish league titles and the UEFA Champions League in 2006 and 2009. Over the same timeframe, he has played 37 times for his country and scored 13 international goals.

Unspoilt hero

Even with medical help, he is, at 1.69 metres, (5' 6½") small for a professional footballer, reflected in his affectionate nickname, La Pulga, or The Flea. In Spain, this epithet has been modified to La Pulguita Atómica, an adaptation of the name there for 1960s cartoon superhero Atom Ant. It's impossible to detect a sign that any of this bothers the player, and why should it? He has just turned 23 and has a contract at Barcelona that is reported to be worth more than €10 million a year, as well as endorsement deals from adidas. He has clearly enjoyed the 2010 World Cup and is at the top of the sport now. But just as size seems to do nothing to

detract from his powers, fame and fortune appear to do little to spoil him.

"It's certainly something special to have been named as the World Player of the Year, especially after coming close in the two previous years" he says, "but it's more important to win prizes as a group, for your team to win trophies. Any of my Barcelona team-mates would have been an equally worthy winner. At a personal level, I want to keep learning and keep improving, adding aspects to my game to become a more complete player."

His ability to accelerate past opponents, his magical left foot and his keen eye for goals have won him comparisons with all-time great Diego Maradona, who is Argentina's national team coach. Maradona himself has said that the team's current number 10 is the player to pick up his mantle and to lead Argentina to new glories. Typically, Lionel Messi plays this down. He shrugs his shoulders and says: "Well, it's flattering, but there is only one Maradona and there can never be another. I'm trying to learn everything I can, but I recognise that I'm a long way off his level so I just push ahead with my own career and don't think about comparisons with Diego."

He admitted to knowing little about South Africa before the World Cup began but said he was greatly looking forward to visiting the country and giving of his best in the competition. "The World Cup is the most important tournament a player can take part in," he adds. "You're representing your country, which is important, especially in Argentina where people care so much about football." 🌐