

A N D Y W E S T



LIONEL
MESSI

AND THE ART OF LIVING

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Chapter One

The Price of Success

Argentina 2-1 Brazil
FIFA World Youth Championship semi-final
Tuesday 28 June 2005, Galgenwaard Stadion, Utrecht

It is the summer of 2005, and the most talented young footballers on the planet have spent the last few weeks gathered in the Netherlands with dreams of winning the sport's most prestigious junior tournament: the FIFA World Youth Championship.

After 36 games of intense competition, they have been whittled down to just four remaining teams – and one of the semi-finals is being contested between South American neighbours Argentina and Brazil, the protagonists of perhaps international football's most famous and heated rivalry, whose brightest emerging stars are now going head to head for a place in the final.

With just six minutes played, the ball is passed to Argentina's diminutive number 18, who receives possession slightly right of centre, around 30 yards from goal. His name, the whole world will soon know, is Lionel Messi.

An attacking player for Spanish club FC Barcelona with a handful of first-team appearances already under his belt, Messi controls adroitly and looks up. Seeing space to run into, he cuts inside and dribbles towards the penalty area, always keeping the ball on his favoured left foot.

Two, three, four little touches, using his body to shield the ball away from the Brazilian defender who is trying to close him down. Then, with the opposition players tracking back towards

their own goal to cover the danger, Messi decides to shoot. From 25 yards, he lets fly. The connection is sugar sweet and the ball rockets, without a trace of swerve or dip, straight into the top right corner, leaving Brazilian goalkeeper and captain Renan groping hopelessly at thin air.

‘Look at where he’s put that ball!’ gushes the Argentine television commentator in admiring tones. ‘Unstoppable for all the goalkeepers in Brazil’s history!’

It is certainly a sensational strike, even drawing applause from some of the Brazilian fans inside the stadium in Utrecht. But it is not enough to seal victory and progression to the final, because Brazil bounce back to level the game with 15 minutes remaining through a set-piece header from midfielder Renato. 1-1.

With the clock winding down, extra time is looking inevitable. Deep inside stoppage time, however, Argentina have one more chance to attack as the ball goes out of play for a throw-in, midway inside Brazil’s half. Swiftly, midfielder Neri Cardozo gathers the ball on the left touchline and hurls it down the line into the path of Messi, who has already started his run into space.

Messi gathers the ball on the left flank, level with the edge of the box. He drives towards goal, drops his shoulder to beat a challenge, reaches the byline and cuts back a low cross to the near post. Argentina’s substitute striker Sergio Aguero can’t connect cleanly, but the loose ball drops obligingly to the team’s captain, Pablo Zabaleta, who twists to shoot and sees a deflection wrong-foot Renan, sending the ball bouncing into the back of the net.

Victory for Argentina, and a place in the final! And Messi, with a brilliant goal and an assist, is again the hero, just as he had been three days earlier – the day after his 18th birthday – in the quarter-final against a Spain team featuring his former Barcelona youth team-mate Cesc Fabregas and future full internationals David Silva, Juanfran and Fernando Llorente.

In that last-eight encounter, with the game tied at one apiece midway through the second half, Messi had delivered a delicately weighted pass to break open the Spanish defence and release Gustavo Oberman, who finished well to make it 2-1. Two minutes later, Messi completed the job himself with a

superb solo strike, receiving the ball on the edge of the penalty area and taking two deft touches to create space for a low shot which he dispatched clinically into the far corner.

Even now, though, with Spain and Brazil both defeated and a place in the final assured, there is still work to be done before Argentina can be crowned world youth champions. Next, they have to play Nigeria in the final.

Messi, as Argentina's star turn and most in-form player, will inevitably be at the heart of the Albiceleste's efforts in the title decider against a Nigeria team which overcame Morocco and hosts the Netherlands to reach the final – and as soon as the game starts he's in the thick of the action, snapping into a challenge to win the ball and spark his team's first attack after just 15 seconds.

Predictably, Messi is the central character when the scoring is opened towards the end of the first half. Argentina launch a counter-attack and Messi receives possession on the halfway line, turning sharply to dribble past one defender, then another, and then advancing into the box before being felled by a reckless challenge from Nigeria centre-back Dele Adeleye. It's a clear penalty, and Messi picks himself up to convert from the spot, coolly sending goalkeeper Ambruse Vanzekin the wrong way.

But Nigeria fight back, levelling the game early in the second half, and tension rises as the game ticks into its final quarter. Then, with 20 minutes to play, comes the next big moment: Aguero breaks into the area from the right and is clumsily fouled by opposing full-back Monday James, giving referee Terje Hauge an easy decision: another penalty.

After a long delay during Nigerian protestations, Messi again steps up to take his second spot-kick of the game. And again his aim is true, as he slides the ball into the bottom right corner while Vanzekin dives to the left. 2-1 to Argentina.

This time there's no way back for the African team, and 20 minutes later the final whistle is blown: Argentina are the world champions, and 18-year-old Lionel Messi is the hero. Two goals in the final, a goal and an assist apiece in the semi- and quarter-finals, and individual awards for the best player and leading scorer of the tournament.

Superstardom beckons!

Chasing the dream

Lionel Messi's soaring success as a teenager with his national under-20 team that summer in the Netherlands, which he described at the time as the best moment of his life, can be seen as a reward for all the effort he had exerted to get that far. A pat on the back from the gods of football for a job well done, and a tantalising promise that even more exciting and rewarding glories would be forthcoming if he could stay on his current path.

That path, though, had not been an easy one for Messi to tread.

The story of his childhood is already well known. But it is worth recapping again here, to provide some context for the journey this precocious talent had to travel before he could hold aloft the world's most prestigious trophy in youth football that sunny summer day in 2005.

As a young boy growing up in a middle-class family in Rosario, a medium-sized city in central Argentina, Lionel Messi (born on 24 June 1987) was like many others of his age: obsessed with football, always with a ball at his feet, and spending every spare second out on the street or in the city's parks playing games with his cousins and older brothers – Rodrigo and Matias – or with the local club side, Grandoli, who he started to represent at the age of five before then joining the youth ranks of one of the city's top-flight clubs, Newell's Old Boys.

His parents, Jorge and Celia, were happy to support their sons' shared infatuation with the round ball, and when they were unable to make the journeys to drop off and collect little Leo, Rodrigo and Matias, their much-cherished maternal grandmother – also named Celia – would always step in to ensure the boys could train and play, giving them endless supplies of moral and emotional encouragement every step of the way.

All of this is perfectly commonplace. Nothing unusual so far. Boys who love football, show some talent for the game and enjoy the support of a doting grandparent – we've heard this one before.

But the story for Lionel, who had always been very small, took a sharp deviation away from the norm at the age of ten, when he was diagnosed with a growth deficiency which could

only be treated by the daily injection of hormones. And that treatment was going to be very expensive – around £1,000 a month, more than half of his father Jorge's salary.

Without the treatment, he would continue to grow at an abnormally slow rate, which would also inevitably slow his progress on the football field, allowing opposition players to easily brush him off the ball as they grew into tall and strong teenagers while he remained underdeveloped. If Leo's dreams of becoming a top-level professional footballer were to be maintained, there was no option: he needed those injections, plain and simple.

Initially, Jorge's social security benefits were able to cover the cost. And for two years, Lionel personally undertook the task himself, uncomplainingly injecting himself every single day without fail, alternating on a daily basis from left leg to right before he went to bed at night.

When he was 12, though, problems ensued because the state welfare system would no longer pay for the treatment. Jorge approached Leo's club, Newell's, who made encouraging initial noises but then failed to be forthcoming with the cash. So Lionel travelled 200 miles from his home town of Rosario to the country's capital, Buenos Aires, for a trial with Argentina's most successful club, River Plate. They were impressed, but not enough to invest so much money in a player so young.

The Messi family was running out of options. If Lionel's treatment was discontinued, his chances of playing football at a decent level would almost certainly be over – he would just be too small and frail to compete with his peers, and it was highly unlikely that he would ever be able to catch up.

Eventually, Jorge, Celia and Lionel decided together that only one course of action was open to them: they would move, all of them, to Europe, where they would find a club with a well-managed youth system and the necessary resources to pay for the hormone injections. It was their only choice, especially in the aftermath of a deep economic crisis which had wiped away the disposable incomes of millions of Argentines.

So they jumped on a plane to Barcelona, where Lionel won 32 trophies, scored 600 goals and became the greatest player in history.

That simple? No. Far from it.

Moving to Barcelona, which sounds so easy when it is reduced to those mere three words, was an extremely painful and complex process on many levels for the whole Messi family. It took months to plan, and meant uprooting four children (the boys had a younger sister, Maria Sol). It meant Jorge leaving his good job as a manager at an engineering firm. It meant Celia leaving her beloved extended family.

The whole thing was an enormous risk for such a young boy, even more so because there was no guarantee of a contract, treatment or actually anything at all beyond a short trial waiting at the other end.

Through the influential agent Josep Maria Minguella (who had also facilitated Diego Maradona's move to the Camp Nou many years earlier), the Messi family had been in touch with Barcelona, who were willing to offer a two-week trial after liking what they saw on the video tapes of Leo in action. But a trial is only a trial, and that is a very long way from a commitment to a contract. Lionel was only just 13 years old, still very small, and in those days signing any players from overseas was extremely unusual even for the biggest of clubs – never mind a tiny youngster who needed expensive medical treatment and a relocation package for his entire family.

Once the trial started in the summer of 2000, Lionel was painfully quiet off the pitch – one of his new team-mates, Cesc Fabregas, has since jokingly claimed he initially thought Messi was mute – but he was sensational on it, routinely dribbling past desperate challenge after desperate challenge to score sensational solo goal after sensational solo goal. Very quickly, his new team-mates and coaches were won over by his talent.

The decision of actually signing him, though, with all the expensive complications that entailed, was not one that anybody at the Camp Nou was prepared to take. Finally, the club's technical director Charly Rexach – who missed the first part of Messi's trial because he was attending the Olympic Games in Sydney – was convinced.

After witnessing the little young Argentine score a dazzling goal in a practice game on the artificial pitch in the shadow of the Camp Nou, Rexach made the commitment the family had

been waiting for: Barça would sign Leo, they would pay for his treatment, they would provide accommodation for the family to live, and they would find a job with a decent salary for Jorge.

The Messi family, hugely relieved but still very nervous, returned to Argentina to prepare for the permanent move, with the promise from Rexach that everything would be sorted and Lionel would soon be presented with an official contract to formally sign for FC Barcelona.

Even then, though, it was far from plain sailing. Rexach was confronted by serious internal disagreement from board members who were staunchly against making such a big financial commitment, breaking all the club's budgets, to sign an under-sized 13-year-old from thousands of miles away on the basis of a brief trial. It was weeks rather than days before Rexach was finally able to push the deal through, giving more sleepless nights to Jorge, who was understandably worried that the Spanish club would eventually refuse to honour the agreement and the family would be left stranded.

Things became even harder for Leo when he finally returned to Barcelona in February 2001, five months after his initial trial, to sign officially and begin his new life in Europe. Firstly, as a foreigner, he was only allowed to compete in regional league games and mediocre-quality friendlies, severely limiting his initial playing time. And then, in just the second of those low-key matches he was allowed to play, he suffered a broken leg – his first serious injury – to force him out of action for the rest of the season.

In the meantime, Jorge was still failing to receive the agreed financial support from the club, and Leo's younger sister Maria Sol was missing Argentina so badly that in the summer she moved back to Rosario with her mother and brothers, leaving Lionel and his father alone in Barcelona, splitting the family in half across the deep wide ocean.

Leo, very much a vulnerable young teenager, was very close to his mother and missed her terribly, with their regular phone calls and web chats proving an inadequate replacement for seeing her every day. He cried himself to sleep on many occasions, and when he woke up his daytime routines were complicated by his lack of familiarity with the local Catalan

language, further slowing his integration process and making him miss the familiar comforts of home even more.

All things considered, the shy and small Lionel Messi's transition from the innocent happiness of childhood at home with his friends and family to a supposedly glamorous new life at one of the biggest and best football clubs in the world was anything but easy.

Dream move? At times during those early days, it must have felt more like a nightmare.

Talent is not enough

Brendan Rodgers has spent the last two decades helping talented young footballers develop into successful senior professionals.

After his own playing days were cut short by a chronic knee injury at the age of 20, Rodgers set himself upon a new career path by taking a low-level coaching position within the junior ranks at Reading. Over the next ten years he gradually climbed up the club's academy coaching ladder before, in 2004, he was hand-picked by Jose Mourinho's assistant Steve Clarke to coach the youth team at Chelsea.

He subsequently moved into senior management with Watford, before continuing his career with stints at Reading, Swansea, Liverpool and now Celtic.

Even though it's ten years since he last coached an underage team, Rodgers has never forgotten his roots and has always placed his trust in youth: at Reading, he launched the careers of Gylfi Sigurdsson and Ryan Bertrand; his hat-trick hero in Swansea's Championship play-off final victory (against, ironically, Reading) was a young player he had previously worked with at Chelsea, Scott Sinclair; Liverpool came agonisingly close to winning the Premier League in 2014 with a pair of players in their early twenties, John Flanagan and Philippe Coutinho, and teenager Raheem Sterling, and Rodgers' consecutive treble-winning teams at Celtic have prominently featured young stars such as Moussa Dembele, Kieran Tierney, Patrick Roberts and Odsonne Edouard.

And after overseeing the progress of several hundred young players during the course of his long coaching career, Rodgers strongly believes in a simple mantra: talent is not enough.

‘The first thing you look for in a young player is talent, and as a boy Messi clearly had natural talent which could be nurtured,’ Rodgers explains in an interview for this book.

‘But there are thousands upon thousands of talents throughout the world of football, and if you can’t dedicate your life to becoming a player, talent alone eventually won’t be enough to make it. To become a successful professional, lots of different qualities are also needed. One of the first and most important is mental resilience.’

Messi, we have seen from the story of his childhood, certainly had that resilience. From the age of ten, he had to spend three years administering himself with hormone injections every single day. When the money for that treatment ran out, Newell’s Old Boys would not pay. River Plate also rejected him. Barcelona offered him a trial but took months to follow it up with a formal contract. When that eventually came, his entire family had to uproot their lives and move 6,000 miles away from home. He struggled with the local language and was slow to integrate with his new team-mates. His sister hated Spain so much she moved back home, leaving Lionel in a new and strange city with no friends, no mother, no siblings and only his father for company.

How easy it would have been, at any stage during that long and arduous process, for Messi to have simply given up. To have decided that his childish fantasy of becoming a professional footballer, which had every chance of coming to nothing anyway, wasn’t worth the aggravation to himself or his family. To have taken the easy option, refused the injections, stayed in Rosario, carried on playing for Newell’s at whatever level he happened to reach and settled for that.

But he did not give up. He took each obstacle and setback in his stride and carried on. When he was too small, when he had to inject himself every day, when he was effectively rejected by two clubs in Argentina, when he was kept waiting for months by Barcelona, when he was desperately homesick, when he was unable to play for his new club, when he was badly injured, when he didn’t understand the language in his new city, when he was forced to live apart from his mother and his brothers ... when all those things happened, he just carried on.

Messi's mental fortitude during his childhood was really quite unconnected from his ability to play football. Yes, he could dribble the ball past a row of defenders. Yes, he could shoot with deadly accuracy into the bottom corner. But if he hadn't also been able to handle the severe mental demands of suffering from a hormone deficiency, moving to a new continent and leaving behind his family and friends, those sporting skills would not have taken him very far.

In fact, Rodgers believes a wealth of pure talent can even prove to be a drawback for young players when they suddenly become confronted by how competitive the professional game is, and by how much work they will have to undertake if they want to enjoy a prolonged career at the top.

'Lots of players have natural ability,' he says. 'But that natural ability can sometimes even be a difficulty, especially in the modern world of sports science and psychology where everything is analysed and natural advantages can be challenged.'

'If you've got natural ability and that's always been your greatest strength, it can become a problem because everything has always been easy, but then you reach professional level and it's not easy at all. To overcome that, you need to have a capacity to learn and grow. How quickly can you learn? If you get a player who is naturally gifted but also has a capacity to learn, develop and grow, then you've got real potential.'

'But if you want to be successful, there's always a price to pay. You have to continually test yourself. You have to make sacrifices. With Messi, at a very young age he was moved into a new culture, away from his family and friends, and he had to devote his life to football in completely new surroundings. Lots of young players can't cope with that, and having that ability to persevere when things get difficult is so important.'

Messi was mentally equipped to cope with the various challenges he faced, and that – as much as his brilliance with the ball at his feet – was an absolutely fundamental aspect of his continued development after he made the move to Barcelona.

He soon flourished in the youth team at La Masia, the club's famed football academy, scoring goals at a rapid rate and helping his team, which also included Fabregas and

Gerard Pique, win every trophy available. Then he accelerated through five different youth teams in the course of just one season before, in November 2003, less than three years after permanently arriving in Spain, he was given his first-team debut by manager Frank Rijkaard as a substitute in a friendly against Porto. A competitive debut came the following year, then his first goal at senior level (against Albacete in May 2005) and then, a few weeks later, the World Youth Championship title with Argentina.

The bewildering speed of Messi's progress during his teenage years could fool us into thinking that his advancement from youth team football in Argentina to superstardom in Barcelona had been a merry and gentle waltz. In reality, as we have seen, it had been anything but easy.

And when we see Messi now, scoring goals and winning titles, driving luxury cars and living in an ultra-modern beachside mansion, earning countless millions and receiving daily adulation, it's easy to fool ourselves into thinking that he has an easy life. That he is a lucky man. That he has landed on his feet. But before you can land, it's necessary to jump, and one of the main reasons that Messi is now blessed with more of the best things that life has to offer is that he has also been prepared to endure more of the hardest things that life has to offer without complaint and without backing down.

In the modern world, where social mobility is supposedly more fluid than ever before, we are often told to follow our dreams and have big ambitions. Impossible is nothing. Just do it.

Often these emotive rallying cries are little more than catchy slogans dreamed up by marketing executives with a new product range to sell, but Messi provides evidence that just occasionally, if you have the right mentality as well as talent, even the grandest of dreams really can come true.

'Because he was resilient and prepared to persevere, the natural talent of Lionel Messi became a working talent,' says Rodgers. 'And that working talent being applied every day over many years made him the genius he is. Don't get me wrong, there's also lots of natural ability as well. But it's by being a working talent that he's become the greatest player in the history of the game.'

The passion for success

For Messi, being crowned world champion at youth level in 2005 was the end of one era, and the beginning of another.

After that summer, he never again returned to junior football. Within a couple of months he was a full international. By the end of the season he was a household name, a regular in Barcelona's starting eleven, a European champion and preparing to play in another world championship – this time the real deal, the World Cup.

So the triumphant tournament in the Netherlands was the end of the journey for Messi as a boy. It was now time for him to become a man and continue his ascent towards greatness.

At this point it might appear inevitable that Messi, having overcome his growing pains and triumphed at the World Youth Championship, would then automatically become a hugely successful global superstar, as though the rest of his story was predestined and nothing could possibly go wrong.

But that's not the case at all. Plenty of players are great at 18, among the best in the world at that age, but then – for a variety of reasons – they fail to progress any further.

Just look at the line-ups from Argentina's games that summer in 2005, starting with his Albiceleste team-mates. Some of them, like Sergio Aguero, Pablo Zabaleta, Ezequiel Garay and Lucas Biglia, went on to enjoy excellent careers at the highest level, continuing to play alongside Messi on a regular basis with the senior national team for many years and cramming their mantelpieces full of silverware won with an array of the biggest clubs in the world.

Not everybody was quite so fortunate. For example, the striker who converted Messi's pass against Spain in the quarter-final and then kept Aguero out of the starting eleven for the final, Gustavo Oberman, never really established himself as a top-level professional, playing for several clubs in Argentina without any great success and suffering a failed attempt to break into Europe with brief spells at Cluj in Romania and Cordoba in Spain.

Oscar Ustari, the team's goalkeeper, ended up spending most of his playing days as an understudy at unremarkable clubs like Getafe, Almeria and Sunderland, before returning

to Argentina to join Newell's Old Boys and then moving to Mexico with Atlas. That's not a terrible career, by any means, but it is well below the heights he might have hoped to hit when he accompanied Messi, Aguero and Zabaleta to world championship glory back in 2005.

The same pattern is repeated with the other competing teams in that tournament. Spain, for example, in addition to containing well-known names such as Cesc Fabregas and David Silva, were captained by central defender Miquel Robuste, who only managed a handful of senior top-flight appearances for Levante before seeing his career disappointingly dwindle away – he now plays for Badalona, just up the coast from Barcelona, in the Spanish third tier.

Brazil's scorer in the semi-final meeting with Argentina, Renato, spent the next few years occasionally representing various lower-ranked clubs and was last seen with Sao Caetano in the Brazilian second tier before finishing his professional career, aged just 28, in 2013. And the Nigeria goalkeeper beaten twice by Messi from the penalty spot in the final, Ambruse Vanzeke, has passed his career in his home country, mostly with Warri Wolves, and never advanced into the senior national team.

This might be hard to contemplate, but the same underwhelming fate could also have befallen Messi. There was nothing inevitable or preordained about the way in which he advanced from that summer's triumph to become the all-time leading scorer in Barcelona's history.

It could have all gone wrong for him, just as it did for Robuste and Renato.

In fact, it is quite striking, looking back now at the footage from that tournament, just how much room for improvement there was for the teenage Messi.

He had some spectacular moments, of course, including the crucial goals and assists against Brazil and Spain described at the beginning of this chapter. He was obviously very talented and had huge potential. But he also made a lot of mistakes, regularly and needlessly conceding possession by running with the ball for too long, heading straight into traffic or taking the wrong passing option.

Back then, in the summer of 2005, he was clearly a very good player, and easily recognisable as the elite performer he duly matured to become, but there was not always the final delivery to go with his dazzling dribbling ability. He was nowhere near the finished product, and had some jagged rough edges which needed to be smoothed off before he could be considered a top-class professional. He might never have made that progression at all.

What separates Aguero, Zabaleta, Fabregas and Silva from Ustari, Robuste, Renato and Vanzekin? Why were the former quartet able to maintain their youthful status among the very best players in the world while the latter became relative also-rans? At the age of 18, all these players were competing at more or less the same level. What explains the stark divergence in fortunes once they moved into adulthood?

There is no simple or single answer. Many, many things can go wrong as a talented teenager treads the precarious path towards lasting success: injuries; loss of focus; poor management or coaching; bad advice; weak character; lack of discipline or temperament and plain bad luck ... they can all conspire to derail even the most talented of young performers.

Celtic boss Brendan Rodgers – whose own playing career was ended early by injury – has already identified mental resilience and perseverance as key ingredients in the quest to convert youthful promise into a successful career, and the next quality he pinpoints is that most basic of human qualities: passion.

‘Lots of the most successful players I’ve worked with have that passion,’ Rodgers says. ‘Two of them are now Messi’s teammates, Luis Suarez and Philippe Coutinho. When I worked with them at Liverpool, you could clearly see they just loved football. They wanted to train every day and play every day and they would always be among the last to leave because of their love and passion for football.’

‘That passion is so important, especially now in the modern game where in many ways it’s become a business. If you can retain that passion and pure enthusiasm for the game, even in the environment of a business where there’s so much money

flying around, that should allow you to do the right things as a professional.'

For young players, Rodgers believes that displaying passion and commitment both on the pitch and on the training ground also carries the additional benefit of earning the respect of the squad's established senior professionals, who do not take kindly to the sight of hot prospects from the youth team arriving at first-team level with a nonchalant sense of entitlement.

'When you're a young player, your aim should be to get in with the senior players and show them they can trust you,' says Rodgers. 'And that trust is not based only upon your talent but also upon how hard you're prepared to work. Messi has always been the type of player whose football did his talking and that would have made the process easier, just another part of his journey.'

Messi's passion for football, his unadulterated love of the game, has always been evident from the almost naïve enthusiasm he displays on the pitch, and at professional level one of the earliest signs of this quality – proving unequivocally to his team-mates and everyone else that he was worthy of respect – came in March 2007, when he took a starring role in a thrilling Clásico meeting with Real Madrid.

The two teams had been faltering in recent weeks with Madrid winning just one of their last six games and manager Fabio Capello consequently rumoured to be on the verge of losing his job, while hosts Barça were also under pressure after losing two of their previous three games. It was consequently expected to be a tight, nervy affair – but instead, Messi, despite only being 19 years old, turned it into a Clásico classic.

Ruud van Nistelrooy opened the scoring early on for Madrid, but Messi soon levelled by receiving a pass from Samuel Eto'o and sliding a precise low shot past Iker Casillas. Almost immediately, still with just 12 minutes played, van Nistelrooy restored the visitors' advantage from the penalty spot, only for Messi to pounce on a loose ball and fire home, making it 2-2 before half-time.

After Barça were reduced to ten men with the dismissal of Oleguer Presas, Madrid went ahead for the third time through Sergio Ramos's flicked header from a set piece, but irrepressible

teenager Messi would not be denied: in the 91st minute he took Ronaldinho's pass in his stride, surged away from two defenders and thrashed a powerful strike past Casillas, before racing away in a frantic shirt-tugging, badge-kissing, shouting and screaming celebration which made it clear just how much the goal had meant to him.

That hat-trick in March 2007 showed that Messi, at the age of 19, was very much on the right track. He had the talent. He had the resilience and the perseverance. He had the passion and the willingness to work hard.

All the ingredients were coming together, but there were still more challenges to overcome.

From always injured to always available

An important side note to that Clasico hat-trick was that, even though the game came two and a half years after Messi's competitive first-team debut, it was the first time he had ever played against Real Madrid at the Camp Nou.

This was because the early years of his career were blighted by a series of injuries, mainly muscle strains with Messi struggling to grow into his body as he developed from a boy into a man – not helped by his poor diet, which featured an excess of junk food and not enough fruit and vegetables.

The regular recurrence of these relatively minor but frustrating injury absences was a warning sign for Messi: if he had allowed them to continue, he risked seriously testing the patience of Barcelona's fans, directors and coaches, who would have been very reluctant to hand out lucrative new contracts or give a more prominent playing role to a youngster who was nearly always injured, no matter how much talent he had.

Fortunately, Messi and his advisors were sharp enough to recognise the dangers and he took the necessary action, putting himself on a strict new diet and devising a tailored training programmes to look after his injury-prone muscles, and the apparent fragility of his youth has now been long forgotten: since 2008 he has never played less than 30 league games in a season, and he has made at least 50 appearances in all competitions in eight of the last ten campaigns.

Brendan Rodgers believes this durability, which has arisen from self-imposed discipline, is another key to Messi's success, saying: 'His availability has been remarkable.

'To achieve everything that he's achieved, and score the number of goals he's scored, he's had to be available to play 50 or 60 games a season every year for ten years. To do that you need to be at the top level of your fitness, and look after yourself in every aspect of your lifestyle.

'I've worked with some players who I believed were going to be top players but they could never find that availability, and with Messi it's very clear that he looks after himself in order to be available to play every week.'

Although he is too discreet and polite to name names or point fingers, one of the gifted players who worked with Rodgers but failed to always be available – and perhaps the starkest example of sadly squandered talent among Messi's contemporaries – is Mario Balotelli.

During his teenage years with Inter Milan, Balotelli was a genuine sensation. In 2008, at the age of 17, he scored twice to knock Juventus out of the Coppa Italia, prompting the website *sportslens.com* to gush: 'His touch and technique [are] already reminiscent of the greats of football history.' Later that year he became Inter's youngest ever scorer in the Champions League, and the club's president Massimo Moratti raved: 'The quality he has you cannot ignore and we must support him to the fullest.'

Inter's next manager Jose Mourinho – never noted for his ability to develop young players – did not fully agree with that sentiment, and after a series of disciplinary issues Balotelli was allowed to join Manchester City for £22.5m (a substantial sum in those days) in the summer of 2010, reuniting with his first professional manager Roberto Mancini. Balotelli was still only 20 years old, and this was his second chance to blossom into an elite performer – a possibility underlined when he was given the 2010 Golden Boy award for the best young player in the world, previously presented to Messi in 2005.

At first, there were hopeful signs that Balotelli would eagerly seize his latest opportunity as he quickly became a fixture in ambitious City's starting eleven and finished his first season in England by being named man of the match in the 1-0 FA

Cup Final victory over Stoke, playing a key role as his club won their first trophy in 35 years.

The following season also contained some memorable highlights, including two goals and a fabulous performance in an era-defining 6-1 victory over Manchester United at Old Trafford, and an assist to Aguero for the dramatic title-winning goal in the final minute of the final day of the Premier League campaign against Queens Park Rangers.

But his disciplinary problems persisted, and midway through the following season City's patience – just as Inter's had a couple of years previously – finally ran out. Balotelli returned to Italy with AC Milan, where the same cycle repeated itself: occasional flashes of brilliance overshadowed by a lack of discipline and inconsistent performances. A poor season under Rodgers in Liverpool was followed by a poor season back with Milan, and Balotelli, now 28 at the time of writing, has spent the last couple of years attempting to revive his career in France with Nice.

Balotelli's talent has never been in doubt. When he was 18, it could be argued that he was better than Messi had been at the same age. Even now, at his best he is unplayable. But his best has only been evident on rare occasions, and one of his greatest weaknesses has been his lack of availability: seven of his 12 professional seasons have seen him make less than 30 appearances in all competitions.

Balotelli is enjoying a good career as a top-flight player. He will earn many millions, win a few trophies and could yet resurrect his international career after recently being recalled by Italy for the first time in four years. But with his boundless talent he could have been a world-beater, one of the very best of his generation – perhaps even as good as Messi. The reason he so far has failed to do so has nothing to do with his ability, and everything to do with his application.

And his story is a stern reminder that world class at the age of 18 does not necessarily mean world class at the age of 28. The road to success is tough; staying on it is even tougher.

Ronaldinho's example to follow ... and avoid

Early in his professional career, Messi was given a close-up lesson about exactly what can happen if the necessary

commitment to continued excellence is not sustained, with a high-profile team-mate swerving off the path in spectacular and tragic fashion.

When Messi progressed into the senior team, the undisputed king of the Camp Nou was Ronaldinho. The flamboyant Brazilian was a World Cup winner with Brazil in 2002, joined Barça from Paris St Germain a year later and proceeded to thrill and astound fans on a weekly basis with his joyfully audacious and endlessly inventive play.

Ronaldinho was at the peak of his powers, widely regarded as the best attacking player in the world – certainly the most thrilling – and he won the Ballon d’Or award by a landslide in 2005. He even earned the rarity of a standing ovation from Real Madrid fans after delivering a particularly astonishing two-goal display in Barcelona’s 3-0 victory at the Bernabeu in November 2005 (a game which also marked Messi’s Clasico debut).

Happily for Messi, Ronaldinho was also a commendably generous and open-hearted individual, who welcomed the young Argentine into the fold with open arms. Rather than jealously regarding him as a potential rival and usurper, the Brazilian superstar saw Messi as a little brother and did everything he could to make him feel comfortable, best illustrated when he brilliantly set up the teenager for his first goal at senior level against Albacete in May 2005 and then paraded him to the impressed crowd by lifting him high upon his shoulders – a touching gesture which also, with hindsight, became heavily symbolic.

Ronaldinho’s arrival in Barcelona in 2003 had sparked a serious upturn in fortunes for the Catalan club, injecting a much-needed sense of optimism after a fallow few years, and he is still very much regarded as a hero figure by fans (many of whom, with a hint of embarrassed guilt, will quietly confide – when they’re sure that nobody else is listening – that Messi might be the better player of the two, but that Ronaldinho was more exciting).

With Samuel Eto’o and Deco playing key supporting roles in the attacking positions, Frank Rijkaard steadying the ship from the sidelines and Messi’s rich potential starting to unfold, Ronaldinho inspired Barcelona to consecutive La

Liga title triumphs in 2005 and 2006, as well as the second Champions League crown in the club's history in 2006. He looked untouchable.

But then, just as he reached the summit, came the fall. The problem was that Ronaldinho lived his life in the same way that he played his football: with a smile on his face, full of energy, full of exuberance, and above all else just wanting to enjoy himself. Reports started to circulate that he was spending more and more time in the nightclubs of Barcelona with a wide selection of the region's finest-looking ladies, sometimes arriving for training in such a bad state that he fell asleep in the changing room and couldn't take part in the session.

Inevitably, Ronaldinho started to lose his physical shape, and his performances dipped. He was still conjuring moments of magic, but they became less frequent, and his lack of professionalism also prompted rumours of divisions within the squad as some players became increasingly frustrated that their star man was not pulling his (rapidly growing) weight.

Ronaldinho could not regain his peak form, and in the summer of 2008 the club decided enough was enough: he was promptly sold to AC Milan. At the time it was a controversial decision but it was proven to be the correct one, with Ronaldinho never again returning to his best and only becoming a partial success during his three years in Italy, before returning to Brazil to while away the remainder of his career with a series of clubs in his homeland, occasionally winning trophies and scoring spectacular goals but never recapturing the form which had made him such a glorious sight between 2002 and 2006.

Watching Ronaldinho's descent very carefully was a young and impressionable Lionel Messi, who hugely admired the charismatic Brazilian during his early days in the senior squad and soon became a friend as well as a team-mate, joining Ronaldinho, Deco and Sylvinho at the 'Brazilian table' in the club's dining room and gratefully allowing himself to be taken under the superstar's wing.

This was a key time in both Messi's career and his life. He was 17 when Ronaldinho created his first goal and hoisted him high upon his shoulders in that game against Albacete; he had just turned 21 when, a little more than three years later,

the Brazilian was sold. During that crucial period, Messi was leaving behind his childhood and entering adulthood. He was becoming a man, and also becoming a highly paid, hugely admired megastar footballer – with all the tempting off-the-pitch opportunities that entails. He also knew exactly how those opportunities could have been exploited, because he saw Ronaldinho do it nearly every night.

The high life, the good times, the glitz and glamour, the extra-curricular entertainment ... they were all opening up in front of Messi, who could have very easily taken advantage of a first-rate guide into this new and beguiling lifestyle in the form of his team-mate and friend.

If Messi had allowed Ronaldinho to become his mentor off the pitch as well as on the field of play, his story could have taken a very different path. He could, perhaps, have taken his eye off the ball to the extent that he became another version of Mario Balotelli, failing to fulfil his endless potential and instead spending more time enjoying his wealth and fame and everything they can offer to a young man who allows himself to be dazzled by the bright city lights on the sunny Mediterranean coast. He could have chosen fun over football, hijinks over high achievement, bedpost trophies over football trophies, the easy life over hard work.

Many people, in the same situation, would have done exactly that. How easy it would have been for such a young, naïve and inexperienced young man to start flashing his newly-earned cash, joining Ronaldinho in carousing until sunrise and neglecting to continue to do the things that had taken him to the top in the first place.

That would have been even easier for Messi due to the regular injuries, as mentioned earlier, he suffered during this period, restricting his availability for first-team action but increasing his availability for nightclub action.

Instead, though, he took the opposite course to Ronaldinho. Rather than yielding to temptation, he made even more sacrifices. He worked harder than ever to regain his fitness and didn't allow his head to be turned – he remained, and still is, a quiet, stay-at-home kind of guy, reserving his energies for training and playing rather than dancing vertically and

horizontally in the nightclubs of Barcelona. He did everything that Ronaldinho didn't, setting himself up for a career of incredible durability rather than becoming a flame that shone brilliantly but quickly burned out.

In addition to Messi's mental fortitude, Brendan Rodgers believes the young Argentine was able to avoid following the example of Ronaldinho, whose decline was played out in vivid detail right in front of his eyes, in significant part thanks to the values he had been immersed in during his time with the club's youth team programme.

'Sometimes the greatest inspiration you can be given is when you have an example of what *not* to do,' emphasises the Celtic boss.

'When he came into the first team, Messi will have looked at Ronaldinho as an incredible talent and been inspired by him because, in those few years when he was at his absolute peak, Ronaldinho was the best player in the world, no doubt about it.

'But Messi was given an education by Barça, and by the time he reached the first team those values and principles were in place. That culture was all about humility and respect, not just for others but for themselves as well. And if you look at the generation of players who came through that culture at La Masia – people like Xavi, Iniesta, Busquets – they all have those qualities.'

Ronaldinho, with his increasing fondness for the excesses of life, was threatening to undermine that culture just as Messi was ready to explode towards greatness. So he had to go. And the differing directions their careers followed after they were separated in 2008 makes it clear that if you want to be the best and continue to be the best, it's necessary to make sacrifices. If you want to bask in the bright glow of the candle at both ends, sooner or later you'll end up getting burned.

Messi vs Ronaldo: the greatest rivalry?

Here is a rather obvious statement: if you want to be the best, you have to be better than everyone else. And if one of your competitors is very, very good indeed, you have no choice but to be even better.

By the summer of 2009, just a year after Ronaldinho's departure, Lionel Messi was already being widely lauded as the best player in the world having played a starring role in Barcelona's historic treble at the end of Pep Guardiola's spectacular first season in charge, including a brilliant headed goal in the Champions League Final victory over Manchester United in Rome.

That same summer, Real Madrid smashed the world transfer record by signing a player who was intended to provide some serious rivalry to Messi both on the pitch in terms of goals scored and trophies won, and off the pitch in terms of individual accolades and global marketing power.

And so was born one of the greatest rivalries in the history of sport: Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo.

Ronaldo was already a bona fide superstar when he was recruited by Madrid for £80m from Manchester United. Fittingly, his last game for the Red Devils had been that Champions League Final against Barça, where he dazzled in the early stages and repeatedly came close to netting the opener before a goal from Samuel Eto'o changed the complexion of the contest and allowed Messi and co to take over.

The Portuguese star had already won one Champions League crown, overcoming Chelsea in rain-sodden Moscow the previous year, and had just helped United to their third consecutive Premier League title, during which time he blasted home 91 goals in all competitions – 20 more than Messi in the same time frame.

What they have both achieved since then is truly mind-boggling.

By the end of the 2017/18 season, when he left Madrid to join Juventus, Ronaldo had scored 450 goals in Spain to surpass the Bernabeu club's previous record holder, Raul, who mustered a mere 323.

Messi, meanwhile, had plundered no less than 552 competitive goals for Barcelona, more than doubling the amount registered by the club's second-highest scorer, Cesar Rodriguez Alvarez (232).

And that's just the start of it. The outlandish figures recorded by these two intergalactic superhuman superheroes

just keep on dripping off the page (stats accurate to the end of the World Cup). Between them, they have scored 694 league goals alone since Ronaldo's move to Spain in 2009. They have both scored at least 40 goals in every single season since 2010, a feat which earned gushing praise and awards galore for Mohamed Salah when he did it just once.

Messi has scored 30 hat-tricks in La Liga; only Ronaldo has more with 34. They have won five Ballon d'Or awards each, exercising an absolute duopoly over the honour for a decade. They are both the leading scorers for their respective countries: Messi with 65 goals for Argentina, Ronaldo with 84 for Portugal. They are the top two scorers in Champions League history, Ronaldo on 120 and Messi with 100, streets ahead of third-placed Raul (71).

The problem we have, sitting in the middle of all these outrageous accomplishments, is that statistics like those have become so well known and comfortably familiar we have started to take them for granted. Messi scored 45 goals last season? Well, that's below his usual standard. Ronaldo netted 15 in the Champions League? Of course he did.

Their goalscoring feats have become normalised, when really they are not normal at all. In the history of football, they are completely abnormal.

So let's step back for a moment, and get some perspective on what these two players have done over the last decade.

Barcelona and Real Madrid are two of the wealthiest, most prestigious and most demanding clubs in sport. They have won honours galore and their list of famous former forwards reads like a roll call of all-time greats: Alfredo Di Stefano, Ferenc Puskas, Johan Cruyff, Diego Maradona, Raul, Romario, Ronaldo Nazario, Ronaldinho ... these two mega-giants of the global sporting landscape have *always* been heavyweight contenders, and they have *always* boasted a plethora of world-class talent.

But over the last few years they have simultaneously possessed players who set new goalscoring records at such a dizzying pace it's not even a contest: Messi has recorded 320 *more* goals (and counting) than anyone else who has ever played for Barcelona; the iconic Hugo Sanchez didn't even manage *half* the total that Ronaldo plundered for Madrid. These are

astronomical achievements amid some serious competition, and the fact that neither of them have suffered a single bad season, and neither of them have slowed down since they turned 30, makes it even more incredible.

Being granted the opportunity to watch just one of Messi or Ronaldo would be special enough, yet for nine years before Ronaldo's move to Juventus we had the pleasure of watching both of them in the same league at the same time. Real Madrid and Barcelona both boasting players who obliterate all their club's scoring records by averaging a goal per game for nearly a decade has never happened before, and it will never happen again.

Messi very much had the better of their early exchanges, claiming that Champions League victory over United in 2009, playing a starring role in the famous 'Manita' victory in 2010 (see Chapter Four), netting twice at the Bernabeu in a Champions League semi-final in 2011 (see Chapter Three) and winning La Liga three years in a row. During that period, Ronaldo's only significant scalp was a cup-clinching headed goal in the Copa Del Rey Final in 2010, and Messi's haul of four straight Ballon d'Or awards between 2009 and 2012 emphasised the gap between them.

Slowly, though, Ronaldo then started to claw back some of the lost ground, and their personal battle soon reached a dazzling crescendo which has somehow been maintained ever since.

The rivalry was perhaps best encapsulated in a Camp Nou Clasico in October 2012. Ronaldo struck first when he received a pass from Karim Benzema and beat Victor Valdes with a low shot inside the near post; Messi responded by latching on to a loose ball in the box to fire home; then Messi conjured more magic with a spectacular 25-yard free kick into the top right corner, only for Ronaldo to answer back with a crisp finish from Mesut Ozil's through ball. The game finished Barcelona 2-2 Real Madrid, Messi 2-2 Ronaldo, summing up both their incredible individual achievements and their unstoppable thirst for goals.

In the last five years, it has been more or less honours even in terms of trophies. Messi has been on top domestically, winning

four more league titles to Ronaldo's one, but the Portuguese has dominated in Europe with four Champions League crowns to Messi's one, also registering the three highest-scoring seasons in the competition's history. Ronaldo has also tasted triumph on the international stage, winning Euro 2016 with Portugal (even though he was off the pitch, injured, when it happened) to eclipse Messi's three losing finals with Argentina.

Without wishing to enter the debate about which of the two players is better, it's clear that both of them have produced almost unheard-of levels of consistency for a very long period and, although this can only ever be a hypothetical discussion, it's interesting to consider whether Messi or Ronaldo would have been able to sustain such outrageous rates of productivity without one key factor: each other.

Their personal relationship is, by all accounts, distant but respectful. There's none of the malice or bitterness that tabloid sections of the media would sometimes like us to believe, and Messi has repeatedly stated that he does not regard himself and Ronaldo as rivals – he is only focussed on winning team trophies, he claims, and has no interest whatsoever in the media-hyped individual battle between himself and the Portuguese star.

But is that completely true? Although (as we will discuss in detail in a later chapter) Messi is very much a team player who is prepared to sacrifice individual ambitions for the good of the group, in the ultra-competitive world of elite sport it's difficult to imagine that Ronaldo's presence in Madrid for nine years had absolutely zero motivational impact.

Of course, Messi and Ronaldo would have both reached extremely high levels of performance if the other one didn't exist (there was no Ronaldo to inspire Messi on the playing fields of Rosario, or during the 2005 World Youth Championship, or during his Clásico hat-trick in 2007), but from Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci to Taylor Swift and Katy Perry, history is full of examples of high achievers who have used personal rivalries as fuel for their own competitive juices. Simply stated, it's self-evident that if Messi wants to be the best player in the world, for the last decade that has necessarily entailed being better than Ronaldo.

The extent to which Messi and Ronaldo have inspired each other is an interesting if ultimately unprovable debate, but Brendan Rodgers believes internal aspirations rather than external rivalries have been more important in their astronomical achievements.

‘I think we’re fortunate that we’ve had two of the greatest players in the history of the game playing beside each other for so long, but I’m not sure how much they’ve influenced each other,’ he says.

‘Maybe subconsciously in some ways they’ve driven each other on, but I think both those players inherently have that hunger to be the very best players they can be. With the very elite performers, that drive comes from within.

‘If you look at Messi, of course he’s always been playing in a top quality team in a system that he knows so well, but he has still had this inner desire and hunger to keep on improving. And there’s also a lot of humility – it clearly doesn’t matter to him what he’s already achieved, he still has the same desire and humility to know that he has to keep on working hard and practising.’

As we can’t inhabit their brains, we will never know for sure – and perhaps neither will the players themselves – whether Messi and Ronaldo would have been quite so good without the other one. But perhaps rather than competing with each other as it has often been assumed, they have really been engaged in an even more intense battle: competing with themselves.

Dead-ball king ... eventually

One of the main reasons that Messi and Ronaldo have enjoyed such incredible longevity has been their ability to find ways of getting better with every passing year. Even as their bodies have inevitably slowed down, they have adapted to the passage of time and remained just as effective as ever, if not more so.

For a specific example of Messi’s relentless quest for self-improvement, we can consider the remarkable transformation he has effected in his ability to score from set pieces.

It’s surprising to learn that during his early days at Barcelona, he was not particularly good at free kicks and, in any case, he very rarely had the chance to take any because ownership

of those duties belonged well and truly to the masterful Ronaldinho.

As England fans will ruefully remember from the 2002 World Cup quarter-final, the Brazilian was a sublime dead-ball expert, capable of curling, caressing or thrashing the ball into the net from practically any angle or distance. Over the course of his career he netted 66 free-kick goals, and it's striking just how varied they were – the top-right corner was Ronaldinho's favoured destination, but he could and did put them anywhere.

So Messi didn't really have much chance to start taking free kicks until after Ronaldinho left the Camp Nou in the summer of 2008, and he didn't need long to net his first: a cheeky, quickly taken effort before the wall had been set in a home win over Atletico Madrid two months into the new season.

At this stage, however, Messi's goals from set pieces initially only came in a slow trickle, and he was by no means a dead-ball specialist. It was only in 2009 – five years after his senior career got underway – that he started to improve his output, and that was partly thanks to advice he received from Diego Maradona during the former World Cup-winning captain's spell as Argentina manager.

According to Fernando Signorini, the national team's fitness coach at the time who was later interviewed by Spanish television channel La Sexta, during one training session Messi took three consecutive poor free kicks and started to walk away in frustration when Maradona accosted him. The old master put his arm around Messi and told him to try a few more, and to allow his foot to linger on the ball for a fraction of a second longer when he made contact, otherwise 'the ball won't know what you want it to do'.

Implementing that advice by committing himself to a lot of practice – which he continues on an almost daily basis – Messi transformed his free-kick-taking abilities beyond all recognition, and he is now one of the most prolific dead-ball experts in history: in the 2017/18 season he scored six goals from set pieces to equal a Spanish league record set 11 years earlier by ... guess who? ... Ronaldinho.

Like Ronaldinho, Messi has developed a wide repertoire of set pieces and can score anywhere the opposing defensive

wall and goalkeeper happen to leave him with an opening. In the spring of 2018, for example, he netted free kicks in three consecutive games: the first, against Girona, was craftily drilled under the wall into the bottom left corner; the next at Las Palmas was a rocket into the top left corner; and then he defeated second-placed Atletico Madrid – effectively sealing the league title – with a wickedly dipping missile into the top right corner.

Interestingly, the inventive ‘under-the-wall’ free kick that Messi pulled out of the bag against Girona was a trick he had previously executed in a World Cup qualifying victory over Uruguay nearly six years earlier. But even then the idea wasn’t original. In fact, he had stolen it from a former team-mate: in 2006, Messi was present in person to witness a free kick being rifled low under the wall during Barcelona’s Champions League meeting with Werder Bremen. The taker? Ronaldinho, of course. The apprentice had learned from the master, in order to eventually overtake him.

This determination to learn and keep on improving is one of the keys to Messi’s greatness, and perhaps the single most important key to his astonishing consistency and durability – and one of the greatest lessons he can teach us: you are never too good or too old to improve.

By the time he received Maradona’s set-piece-taking advice in 2009, he was already the best player in the world, and we have already seen how much hard work had been necessary to propel him to that lofty status.

Even then, though, despite all the plaudits and tributes he was being showered with on a daily basis, Messi still didn’t think he had reached the summit of his potential. He was still humble enough to remain receptive to new ideas, and the improvement in his free-kick technique effected by Maradona, along with the adoption of specific tricks of the trade such as Ronaldinho’s under-the-wall creation, meant he was able to do something which didn’t really seem possible but always is, whoever you are and however good you are: he became even better.

But we are now ready to discover that no matter how much determination, passion and commitment Messi has devoted to

the challenge of making himself the best footballer he could possibly become, he will never be perfect.

Even the best dead-ball experts can't score from every free-kick, and sometimes the most important moments of them all result in heart-wrenching failure.