

THIS ISSUE

● COVER : GOALS AND GLORY

Every four years, the FIFA World Cup persuades the world to pause and look in the same direction.

For a month, football becomes more than a sport. It becomes memory, identity, aspiration, rivalry and, often, a language shared across borders. The 2026 World Cup arrives at a particularly poignant moment. For many fans, it may be the last opportunity to watch Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo on football's biggest stage.

In this issue, we revisit the magic of Mexico '86 and the World Cup memories that shaped a generation. We explore Messi's enduring influence on Argentina, the challenges facing Ronaldo in the twilight of his career, and the subtle brilliance that separates sporting geniuses from everyone else.

But the World Cup is also a story about people. It is about how distant nations become local passions, as Kerala's extraordinary football culture reminds us.

Beyond football, this issue examines the anxiety and uncertainty triggered by cancelled exams, why Apple is looking beyond AI chatbots, and why a growing number of young couples are choosing purpose and balance over the relentless pursuit of hustle.

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Institute. We rarely won the local league since other sides from outside our township — Young Challengers Club and Youth Club — were more consistent but less watchable. For context, we were Rajkot's Liverpool.

Back in the day, our exposure to the world of football was primarily through the written word. Englishman Brian Glanville, the finest football writer ever, was our guide. He took us to iconic stadiums around the world, informed us about the ball skills of greats and sparked our young minds to imagine what they did on fields, oceans away. His beautifully crafted, impressively authoritative articles regularly appeared in Sportstar, that sporting bible of our youth. That glossy magazine with the popular centrefold was dear to us. We would rub our cheeks against its glossy pages for that soothing, smooth feel before devouring the magazine from cover to cover.

Once in a while, if it was our lucky day, the Films Division-produced



Newsreel that used to be shown before movies in theatres and would feature a few seconds-long video clips of international football. It was a blink-and-miss sporting opportunity that came your way in dark cinema halls with un-cushioned wooden seats. To say that we, nestled in our comfortable cocoon, were cut off from the world would be factual — not an attempt to romanticise remoteness.

And then it all happened during that magical summer of 1986 when footballing greats, and even a God, graced our living room every night. We had watched Ravi Shastri drive his teammates in an Audi at MCG a year back but that was not at our home. Watching live sports from your own couch was new to us. As far as eye-openers go, Mexico '86 was epic — it burnt new, permanent footballing images into our retinas, rewriting the old ones.

Poor Baloch, Pasiyo and Ahmed, they were pushed out of our mind space by Maradona, Sócrates, Platini,



Zico, Lineker, Laudrup... the list was unending. To date, Mexico '86 is counted as the most memorable and eventful of World Cups. Hand of God, greatest goal ever, heartbreaking results and that thrilling climax where Valdano latched on to Maradona's measured through-ball to break the 2-2 deadlock in the final against Germany. As the Argentines hugged Maradona, the world, including the recent converts from Rajkot, wanted to jump into the television to be part of the happy huddle.

Our colony's first tryst with top-level football was delightful and also insightful.

It gave a chance to witness how national teams build fanbases in distant lands. How those uninitiated into international football in our neighbourhood picked the teams they would be backing for the World Cup, and the rest of their life, was a story that would have inspired R K Narayan. These were simple folk, with no skin in the game, feeling obliged to connect with the mesmerising men,



from different countries and cultures, playing the Beautiful Game.

Late one night, early in the tournament, the grandfather of a close friend announced to the family, sitting together watching their first World Cup, that Germany was to be the team they would be supporting. Starting as a cobbler mending shoes on the footpath of a busy road, the highly respected patriarch had gone on to own a few imposing footwear shops in the city's tony area. His proclamation had come minutes after the commentator had read the German playing XI, starting with their goalkeeper Toni Schumacher. "See, like us, the German goalkeeper too is a shoemaker. So, henceforth, Germany is our team," he said.

Not far from where we stayed lived the Joshis. In the dead of night, they pledged their allegiance to Brazil. That was after the World Cup's most entertaining team had beaten Poland, where their right-back Josimar had scored through a stunning pile-driver from outside the



D. The next morning, as word spread about Joshi's allegiance, our locality's certified funny man overwrote Mr Joshi's name plate outside his home. It was now reading Joshimar, with the "mar" addition done sloppily with a black sketch pen.

Our milkman would become a huge Michael Laudrup fan as he was from Denmark, a country he knew was big on livestock and dairy products. England, too, had a few fans. The presence of many Gujaratis in the UK, many having come via Africa, was a factor. The English fans loathed Maradona when he first cheated and later humiliated them in that Hand of God game. But they were a minority; Argentina and Maradona ruled most hearts.

For our small group, the hero was the Brazilian, Sócrates. He was tall, lanky, outspoken and an underdog. He was a reflection of a certain Angry Young Man, a popular silver-screen character of that image. Sócrates was a doctor who smoked like a chimney and drank like a



fish. He had a casual air about himself even in high-pressure situations.

Sócrates conducted himself in a crucial World Cup game like a father playing ball with his child in a park. The good doctor answered the biggest question of our teenage lives: What was cool?

Four decades after our baptism by the roaring Mexico fire, the World Cup has come full circle. The big sporting spectacle has commenced in Mexico. Still, nothing can replace the Summer of '86, nor can there be a return to that age of innocence. This is the age of excessive information and data mining. Nothing is left to the imagination. The joy of connecting with strangers on a gut feeling is over.

“Oh, when I look back now ... Those were the best days of my life.” That Summer of 86.



on the ground, after his futile full-length desperate dive to his right, helplessly watching the ball pass him by on his left, was the smooth cursive Messi signature.

The Argentine great could have easily scored by going to the right of the goalkeeper – clearly the best option, as he only had to swing his right foot and hook the ball. He could have even tried the fancier, and often-used, alternative of chipping the ball over the goalie. But Messi, as usual, took the less travelled path — pushing the ball to the goalie’s left, catching him on the wrong foot. It was truly an unimaginable option that only occurs to the outliers, despite the urgency of hectic goal-mouth action.

Mortals beat the goalkeepers, Messi annihilates them. Maradona, and Pele before him, too would do the same — prefer to dribble past the goalkeeper, rather than merely kicking the ball past them. Again, it is about putting the signature.

Masters of the game are known to do things differently. They read the thoughts of their opponents, expose their limitations, make them look awkward and inadequate. Without intending it, they also end up belittling them — just like the Algerian goalkeeper at this World Cup or Pakistan's Moin Khan one late April afternoon at Multan in 2004. In the latter case, it was Sachin Tendulkar, the leg-spinner, who had embarrassed the wicketkeeper.

It was the last ball of the day, and the wicket of the last specialist batsman, a habitual late-order thorn in the flesh for bowlers, would have been priceless for India. Moin seemed ready to defend the ball and take the battle to the next day of the tight Test. With a slip in place, Tendulkar pitched the ball on off-middle. It was the ideal line for the ball to spin towards slip, induce an edge by beating the forward defensive shot. The line was good even for a straight ball that could fetch an LBW.

But then, these are the kind of last-ball



Pakistan wicketkeeper can exchange notes and share the common pain of being the victim of greatness. Messi and Tendulkar also could talk about the joy they get in pulling off such delightful cons.

Check the two YouTube videos and you can see GOATs showing child-like glee in their moments of triumph, beaming and hugging teammates like teens in school playgrounds. Also note that there is no hint of insult towards the vanquished and not a single muscle can be seen flexing superiority. It's simply pure happiness of a carefully planned idea working out, the result of a lifetime of rigorous pursuit.

There is a handy experiment to understand how geniuses think. The next time, while watching Messi, when the ball is at his feet, try guessing the path he and the ball will take. Most of the time, you would get it woefully wrong. It is expected since even the top pros entrusted with the job of marking him have regularly been foxed. When



you expect it to be a square pass to a teammate free on the wings, it would be a through ball to a striker who has just launched his forward run.

Having lived all his life in a crowded midfield and the heavily manned D-area, Messi knows how to find his way through the maze. From his tiki-taka days at Barcelona, he is aware of the angles and routes that not many are familiar with. Born in Maradona's country, he has the skills to use every centimetre of both his feet to send the ball in unexpected directions. Messi has a mind that throws up options that even beat the AI-powered computers of sports analysts.

In an incredibly insightful interaction on his 50th birthday, Tendulkar had given an idea about how sporting geniuses think.

Mind games

It was from a Test at Adelaide in the 1999 India-Australia tour. The bowling



unit had a plan in place against Tendulkar — they would bowl away from him, tempt him to reach for the ball and edge behind the wicket. (Glenn) McGrath bowled four to five maiden overs to him. Tendulkar kept leaving the ball. For those beyond the boundary rope, the Aussies were winning and Tendulkar had been forced into a shell.

At this point in the narration, a smile emerged on Tendulkar's face. "That evening, for the rest of the world, it seemed like I had lost the battle but the Australian team knew I had won the battle. And I knew I had won the battle," he said.

Years later, Tendulkar's dear friend Shane Warne would talk to him about that day. "The guys who mattered knew exactly what happened. Warne told me later about that meeting. They said, 'We are in trouble, he is playing a different game'."

Next morning, Tendulkar would start by hitting a couple of boundaries to balls



that had landed on the same spot that he had been leaving the previous day. “It was a message that I decided when to play and when to leave the ball.”

Wiser after those words, we would ask a follow-up question. How do you get into a bowler’s head? He said that since he bowled a lot, he understood the game better. But it was an incomplete answer. Tendulkar would go on to add: “Certain things can’t be taught.” They just need to be closely observed, appreciated and enjoyed.

Just like Messi’s least-applauded second goal of his hat-trick.

Maybe, this is how he has planned his legacy. He has matched Diego Maradona, his idol and still the most loved footballer in his country, in winning the World Cup. Now, Messi wants to match Messi himself, composing a tribute act to himself. He could spoil the perfect ending that Qatar had bestowed on him, he could turn out to be a parody of himself. He will turn 39 during the tournament. But Messi is not delusional that he just needs to turn up and the goals and assists would automatically arrive, or that he is in his peak physical shape.

All he knows is one truth; that there is still fire raging within him, as powerfully as it was with his five previous participations; that even with the prowess of the muscle fading, he has the wits, the knowhow and belief that he could win games. The feet are as silken as always; the eyes are as sharp and the spirit impenetrable.



in Europe, but can indisputably light up a tournament that needs sporadic bursts of inventiveness rather than sustained aggression. He could be slower than he was in Qatar, but he possesses the vision and intuition to see paths, angles and moves that others don't see. The men around him have to run harder, cover his spaces and mask his non-existent pressing.

All of these they do without complaints, or as a painful duty, but like repaying the debt to the inspiration he has been to them. Julian Alvarez, his forward colleague, had a picture of Messi beside Mother Mary; Lautaro Martinez has an autograph of Messi that he still preserves. Enzo Fernandez was a sprightly teenager when his idol announced his retirement after a doomed COPA tussle in 2016. He then posted an emotional message on his Facebook wall. "How are we, a bunch of nobodies who don't live with 1% of the pressure you do, 40 million people making ridiculous demands of perfection when we don't even know

you, going to try to convince you? Do what you want but think about staying and enjoying it.”

Perhaps, it helped Messi that most of his colleagues in Qatar were from a younger generation that didn’t share the collective angst of losing the 2014 final; men that looked up to him and would resort to the extremes to make him happy. Messi, too, felt more comfortable manning them rather than those of similar vintage.

Whatever the outcome of the World Cup, another enthralling chapter in Messi’s life is writing itself. The role would be much the same as it had been in Qatar, lurking in the shadows and pouncing at the ripest moment, producing trickery that no one imagines. His mere shadow would inspire his troops.

More Xavi

Manager Lionel Scaloni has tuned the team’s game to ensure that no one is overburdened. They don’t press hard

or circulate the ball endlessly. The moment they get the ball, they surge upfield with quick, sharp passing. Those could be long, short, square or diagonal. There will be runners around Messi, who veers to more central channels to conduct the game. In his latter years, he has been more Xavi, his Barca soulmate than himself, capturing the wondrous dexterity.

Perhaps, him lingering in the game originates from the discovery that there are more layers to his game than he had thought. That he is not finished yet. His demeanour would be fascinating. In Qatar, the devil in the saint often surfaced, the rough edges trapped in his peaceful face. The line to Dutch forward Wout Weghorst would be remembered as the rudest line he had ever uttered on the field: “what you looking at, fool?”

Maybe, Messi wants to experience all these emotions again, to suspend his golden sunset again. And the irresistible pull remains; to win and win it again.



is long and arduous, it could have been just a one-evening falling out.

Portugal drew 1-1 with DR Congo in Houston on Wednesday, a result that felt as flat as Ronaldo's performance.

But at 41, in a squad bursting with attacking gifts, every bad outing evokes scrutiny. With every bad day, he seems to be moving closer to the horizon.

Despite the age, the waning explosiveness, Ronaldo still has the bearings to sweet-spot the ball, fetch it where he wants. Against Congo, he simply couldn't. In the 68th minute Francisco Conceicao stabbed a cutback to Ronaldo, a little behind him. It was maybe a yard away from his liking, but in his prime he would contort his body suitably and find the best position. Even if not, he always found a chunk of his glittering boot. Here, he flayed the shot wide off the near post. He sneered and gritted his teeth, wondering how the touch had forsaken him.







