Name: _____ Date: _____

Lionel Messi's Long Road

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 1339 words

Who is Lionel Messi? The short answer fits on a roster card. He is an Argentine forward, born on June 24, 1987, in the city of Rosario. He is 5 feet 7 inches tall and kicks with his left foot, and through November 2026 he plays for Inter Miami in the United States. Much of the world calls his sport football, and this book says soccer for the same game. The long answer is a road with some sharp turns. One of them was a napkin in Barcelona, Spain, in December 2000.

Before Barcelona, Messi played youth soccer for Newell's Old Boys, a club in his home city of Rosario, until 2000. In September of that year, when he was 13, Barcelona gave him a trial from September 16 to September 30. The agent Josep Maria Minguella later recalled that some of the club's directors thought he was too small. He also recalled the club's answer: it would be ten or twelve years before Barcelona saw the benefit. Another account says the board's first response was mixed. By the end of that meeting, it had agreed to start the process of signing him.

On December 14, 2000, Barcelona's technical secretary, Carles Rexach, met the agents Minguella and Horacio Gaggioli at a tennis club in the Montjuïc area of Barcelona. With no paper to hand, he grabbed a napkin. He wrote a note promising to sign Messi, so long as the money terms were agreed. He signed it, and the two agents signed as witnesses. The club's president at the time, Joan Gaspart, said later that officially the napkin "didn't serve as anything." He called it the step before the first real contract. Most of what is known comes from people who were there, speaking years later. At 13, Messi joined La Masia, the club's youth academy.

He moved up quickly. On October 16, 2004, at age 17, Messi played his first match in La Liga, the top division of men's soccer in Spain. Barcelona won the league title that season. He had started the season with the club's B team, and manager Frank Rijkaard moved him up to the first team. On May 1, 2005, he scored his first goal for the senior team. The club's own site says he was then the youngest player ever to score in La Liga. After that the work changed. A teenager with talent has to learn where to stand.

Where a player stands matters as much as how well he kicks. When Frank Rijkaard managed Barcelona, he moved Messi to the right wing. From there Messi could cut toward the middle and shoot with his left foot. In May 2009, manager Pep Guardiola first used him in the middle as a false nine. That is a center forward who drops back into midfield and pulls defenders with him. That leaves empty space for teammates to run into, and for his own dribbling runs. Barcelona won that game 6 to 2 away at Real Madrid.

Writers often explain his dribbling by his size. Because he is short, he has a lower center of gravity than taller players, which is said to help him change direction quickly. That is a common description, not a measured result. What is counted is the output. In 2012 he scored 91 goals for Barcelona and Argentina. That was a record for one calendar year, and it passed the old mark held by Gerd Müller. Counting goals is easy. Counting how a player opens space for others is much harder.

The national team was slower to give him a trophy. At 24, Messi became captain of Argentina, but over the next several years the team did not win one. It lost the 2014 World Cup final to Germany. Even so, he was given the Golden Ball as the tournament's best player. In 2015 it lost the Copa América final to Chile. Then, in 2021, Argentina won the Copa América and ended a 28-year wait for a trophy. It won that tournament again in 2024.

On December 18, 2022, Argentina and France met in the World Cup final in Lusail, Qatar. 88,966 people were there. Messi scored a penalty in the first half, and Argentina led 2 to 0 until France scored twice, 97 seconds apart, late in the game. Messi scored again in extra time, France tied it from a penalty, and it ended 3 to 3. Argentina won the shoot-out 4 to 2, and with it the World Cup. Messi won the Golden Ball for a second time, the first player to win it twice.

People often ask whether he is the greatest of all time. That is an argument, not a measurement. The nearest thing to an official answer is the Ballon d'Or, a yearly award that the magazine France Football has presented since 1956. It is decided by journalists, one from each country in the top 100 of the FIFA men's ranking. Through October 2026, Messi has won it a record eight times. Cristiano Ronaldo is next with five. A vote tells you what voters thought.

At the 2026 World Cup, Messi played in his sixth tournament, and he turned 39 during it. Through the final on July 19, 2026, he had scored eight goals and made four assists. An assist is a contribution that leads to a goal. The count is kept by organizers or journalists, not by the Laws of the game. Kylian Mbappé of France scored ten goals, so he won the Golden Boot and Messi finished second. Argentina lost the final to Spain, 1 to 0, after extra time.

Records keep moving. His six World Cups were in 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018, 2022 and 2026. Through July 2026 he had scored 21 World Cup goals. Mbappé now has one more World Cup goal than he does. On August 31, 2026, Messi announced that he was retiring from Argentina's national team. His last match for it was on October 6, 2026, a 3 to 0 win over Benin in Buenos Aires, at the Mas Monumental stadium. He finished with 126 goals in 208 games for Argentina, and no other player in the team's history has more of either.

Club soccer goes on. Through November 2026, Messi is signed with Inter Miami through the 2028 MLS season. With that club he has won the 2023 Leagues Cup, the 2025 MLS Cup and the 2026 Campeones Cup. In that Campeones Cup final, a 2 to 0 win over Cruz Azul in

September 2026, he scored his 100th goal for the club. Cruz Azul plays in Liga MX, the top league in Mexico. Messi was the first player in the club's history to reach 100, and he did it in 115 games across all competitions.

What does a game ask of a body? A 2005 review of the science found that elite players run about 10 kilometers, or 6 miles, in a 90-minute game. Their average effort is 80 to 90 percent of their maximum heart rate, and it is broken by bursts of jumping, sprinting, tackling and turning. The review also found that the best teams keep raising their physical capacities. For the 2026 World Cup, FIFA announced that the referee would stop every game 22 minutes into each half for a three-minute drink break, whatever the weather.

Scientists also study what a top player does with his head. In one study, researchers filmed 27 players from one Premier League club in 21 matches. They counted 9,574 times a player got the ball. Players who looked around more before the ball arrived completed slightly more passes. The effect was small, and the researchers say so. In a 2025 test on video, skilled players also guessed where a corner kick would land better than less skilled players. None of these studies is about Messi. But the road this book followed runs from a napkin in Barcelona in December 2000 to the final of his sixth World Cup in July 2026. That is more than twenty-five years.

Questions

1. Why did Carles Rexach write the note on a napkin?

A. The club wanted the deal kept secret
B. Napkins were the usual paper for contracts in Spain
C. He had no other paper at hand at the tennis club

2. What did the two agents do as witnesses?

A. They signed to show they saw it happen
B. They paid for the trial
C. They read the napkin aloud to the board

3. Which role asks a center forward to drop back into midfield and pull defenders with him?

A. Goalkeeper
B. False nine
C. Wing back

4. Why does the book say the Ballon d'Or cannot settle who is the greatest?

A. It is decided by a vote, and a vote shows what voters thought
B. It is only given to players from Europe
C. It was stopped in 2026

5. What did the study of 27 Premier League players find?

A. Players who looked around more completed slightly more passes

B. Looking around made players much faster

C. Players who looked around lost the ball more

6. How did Argentina win the 2022 World Cup final?

A. With a goal in the last minute

B. By winning a penalty shoot-out, 4 to 2

C. By winning 3 to 0

Words to know

assist: setup pass
academy: training school
witness: eyewitness
dribbling: bouncing the ball
defenders: back-line players

Answer key: Lionel Messi's Long Road

1. C. He had no other paper at hand at the tennis club
2. A. They signed to show they saw it happen
3. B. False nine
4. A. It is decided by a vote, and a vote shows what voters thought
5. A. Players who looked around more completed slightly more passes
6. B. By winning a penalty shoot-out, 4 to 2