

Messi's Bittersweet Season 18/19

MADRID, Spain – A rare, British, 2019 Champions League final at Wanda Metropolitano is about to get underway on June 1. Competition, in which Lionel Messi has set records upon records, this time features Liverpool and Tottenham in the final. The two English clubs compete after both remarkably overcame obstacles that were Messi's Barcelona and Ajax respectively.

Over 60,000 people will watch the final at the stadium. Tens of millions more will see it on various screens. Among these millions, will too be Barcelona star and Ballon d'Or nominee Lionel Messi. This will be the first time since 2013 that neither him, nor his notorious rival Cristiano Ronaldo, will be participating in the grand finale of the European season. They both still pursue the prestigious individual award nonetheless.

One of the all-time greats, or as some argue – greatest of all time, Messi seems to always be capable of creating magical moments. Most recent Barcelona manager Ernesto Valverde once said of Messi, "I do not know how he always delivers, but he does." His fans know that, and at the beginning of each season they believe Barcelona can win everything. Expectations for 18/19 season were no different. Barcelona were expected to win the treble - the league, the cup and the UEFA Champions League.

Success was within reach for Valverde's team. Appointed in 2017, the Spanish manager gained some trust and stability, before beginning the 18/19 campaign. Valverde made Messi the default captain of the team. For Messi this would be a first at Barcelona – a symbol and a responsibility of an accomplished player and leader.

Messi would also have more free time, he left his national team prior to the season's start. He and Argentina missed out on World Cup glory in Russia in 2018, by losing out to France in the knockout stages. It was a heavy defeat to admit. No one has been as close to Messi as his friend and Argentina teammate Sergio Aguero. "We all know how much Leo loves meeting up with his national team," Aguero said, "we know how much he likes the national team."

The World Cup defeat was a heavy blow for Messi, as was having to leave Argentina to reflect on his career. The national team was in shambles, and he carried the weight on his shoulders.

The season in Spain started well for Messi as he contributed to a Spanish Super Cup win for Barcelona before the league matches began. Barcelona beat Real Madrid 5-1 in the first El Clasico of the season at Camp Nou, and then again 0-1 at Santiago Bernabeu, and then again 4-1 on aggregate in the Copa del Rey semifinal. With the Madridistas having a bad first season without Cristiano Ronaldo, the road looked clear for Barcelona to succeed on all fronts.

They went on to win La Liga with three matches still to go and having only lost twice. It had to be Messi who came off the bench to score the only goal against Levante to give Barcelona the title early. He scored 36 goals and made 15 assists in 34 matches he played in, consistent with his form of past seasons.

Unfortunately for Messi and Co., quality and energy have been stirring in the north. The Premier League title race this year was fierce, bringing many English clubs to top form and giving them a competitive edge.

Unbeaten in the group stage of UCL, Barcelona topped their group consisting of Inter Milan, Tottenham and PSV. In the knockout phase of the tournament they moved on past Lyon and Manchester United with ease.

When Messi scored against Liverpool and Barcelona was winning 2-0 in the first leg of the semifinal, Liverpool still had a chance. Everyone has seen two-goal-down comebacks before. Then, in the second half Messi took it one step further by confidently putting the ball in the upper corner, past the wall, past goalkeeper Allison, from a 30-yard freekick. Fans rejoiced, the job was nearly done. Messi now had 12 goals in 10 appearances in this year's UCL, and the special free kick was his 600th goal for the club. Another milestone reached, in a career of a player who might be some years past his peak.

However, soccer is a team sport above all, and Messi knows that more than anyone. One can only imagine how distraught he felt when his team could not prevent Liverpool from scoring four goals without reply in the reverse game, undoing all the hard work Messi had done the week before. An unforgettable 4-0 loss. After such a disappointment, Messi and the team were shaken. Following that was a 2-2 draw against a bottom-of-the-league side Eibar. Messi kept a professional look in public, saying that his teammates "are still getting over the setback at

Liverpool. It was a big blow. It was difficult to pick ourselves up as you could see in the following game.

“It has been a spectacular year in which we have won the league and we are in the final of the Copa del Rey,” Messi continued in a statement, “We have had a great season, with the exception of the game at Liverpool.” Now, that domestic cup final is the only thing that could salvage Barcelona’s season ambitions.

Fourth in the league, Valencia would be the clear underdog against league winner Barcelona. Messi did not even need to play for most of the tournament for his club to get to here. This time though, Barcelona would start all their key players. That would not prove to be enough, and they lost 1-2.

Messi watches the Madrid Champions League final, but his club will be on his mind as he helps Barcelona board of directors make difficult off-season decisions. He might never again score 50 goals in one La Liga season like he did in 11/12, as he takes on a leadership role at the club. These team results jeopardize his chances of receiving the heavily sought Ballon D’or, the award he has won five times, ever again. All is not lost for him though, as his popularity remains, and he denies speculations. “I want to keep competing at Barca and I have never thought about leaving the club. Nothing makes me think about not competing here.” Messi said of transfer rumors.

Taking on this responsibility as a leader and consultant of his team, he continues to help shape his club’s future, as it did for him so long ago.