

Bryan Gelbe

SOCCER ICONS

The 50 best players of all time and their
greatest achievements



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Introduction

Soccer is the most beautiful, complex and captivating sport. It displays beautiful and subtle movements, but also violent actions and human errors. Like no other activity, it generates deep and mixed emotions: joy, sadness, surprise, disappointment, fellowship, aggression and frustration. All of them emerge in different order during the same match. Soccer is the greatest passion of mankind. No one can ignore it. Directly or indirectly, soccer is part of our lives. It makes no social, economic or geographic distinctions. It does not discriminate by gender or age. The best definition of this wonderful sport was provided by Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano: "Soccer is the only religion that has no atheists."

Soccer can be played very well or very badly; with the best or the worst intentions. You can be generous, supportive and creative. Or you can hit, lie and cheat. It all depends on them: those entering the field, the artists; those who come from nothing and become idols in a blink of the eyes. These men reflect us. They are what many people dream to be but could not be. They are the protagonists of the passion of mankind. They are part of history. They are the soccer players.

There are all kinds of players. The greatest ones are those who remain in our memories; those who achieved great deeds that made fans laugh and cry out of joy: their goals, their dribbles, their passes, their shots, their blocks, their

headers and their saves; their collective moves, their planned plays, the celebrations. Everything we once saw from the stadiums or followed by radio or television; the reason we hug strangers and argue strongly with them -- these are the product of the legacy of the greatest players in history.

Asking who the best of all is will never generate an accurate or objective answer, but everyone who loves soccer has a candidate. It is debated at bars, meetings, parties, jobs and universities. They say time always puts things in place. However, it is important to understand that determining who the best in history is cannot be done. You cannot compare if there is a fifty year gap. Soccer has changed! Life changes! What is possible is to propose the best of each era. Maybe ten years is an acceptable segment for comparison. Following are the top 50 players in the history of soccer.





Now and forever

- 1 -

Lionel Messi

He is the best player of the 21st century, but is he the best ever? Many say yes and many disagree. The debate is endless, but the true extent of Messi's potential will be defined over time. Soccer can be analyzed more accurately at a distance. It will take several years for us to know whether Lio was the best ever. But the figures don't lie: he obtained numerous titles with Barcelona, broke all personal records and scored so many goals that he broke records more than one hundred years old. Messi is the record man.

How did he become the best in the 21st century? The dust was rising on the soccer field in the Argentinean city of Rosario, marking Messi's trail. He was running without stopping, dominating the ball and avoiding rivals from one goal post to the other. You could count his age with only one hand and he had already promised to be a crack. Not even a disease could prevent his fate as a star. When he was very young and played in the lower divisions of Newell's, he faced a strange problem -- a partial deficiency of growth hormone, which prevented him from growing normally. The expensive treatment to improve his health forced Messi and his family to move to Barcelona to follow treatment paid by Barça.

Lionel joined the club where he became number one. He grew up, matured, won and now lives under the aura of the best Barcelona of all time.





- 2 -

Cristiano Ronaldo

He is one of the most important players of the last decade. From his native Portugal, he moved to Manchester United and, in recent years, to Real Madrid -- two of the biggest teams in Europe -- where he won every title he planned to. He is a relentless goal scorer with pure power, good size and great speed. Feared by his talent and labeled as arrogant for his personality, he is praised for his beauty and charisma.

He is the best-selling player in the world and competes with Lionel Messi to be the player of this era. "Buy that boy," Alex Ferguson (then the Manchester United manager) was once told. That voice echoed so loudly in his head that he eventually got him for his team. Cristiano, age 18 and at Sporting in Portugal then, had given the English defenders a real ride in a friendly match. He came to Manchester and they gave him the number seven shirt -- the iconic David Beckham's number. It wasn't too much for him at all. He scored as many goals as he pleased and led his team to be the best in England and Europe.

After six years, he exchanged the red shirt for the white one and went to Real Madrid in a transfer valued at 96 million euros. He was very successful in Spain and strengthened his figure as a leader, hero and savior.