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May 21, 2011

Lionel Messi: Boy Genius

By JERÉ LONGMAN

BARCELONA, Spain — Given a rare night on the Barcelona bench last Sunday, [Lionel Messi](#) yanked on the seat in front of him, hunched his shoulders over the chair back and kicked it with his cleats. He seemed not so much the world's best soccer player as a restless kid in a movie theater.

He is 23, with a grown-up's income reported to exceed \$43 million this year. Yet Messi still has a boy's floppy bangs, a boy's slight build and a boy's nickname, the Flea. Even the ball stays on his feet like a shy child clinging to his father's legs.

It is a boy's fearlessness, enthusiasm, calm and humility, too, that help explain why Messi is already considered one of the greatest ever to play the world's game. In the space of 18 tense days from April to early May, Barcelona played four Clásicos against its archrival, Real Madrid. The Madrid strategy was to strangle beauty out of the matches, to use nasty muscle against Messi, to shoulder him down or shiver him with a forearm or take his legs in scything tackles. Once, he was sent rolling as if he had caught fire.

Messi made small appeals for fairness with his eyes and hands, but he remained unflappable and without complaint. He did not yell at the referee or clamp a threatening hand around an opponent's neck or fake a foul and dive to the ground. He remained apart from ugly words and scuffles and expulsions that marred the matches. Instead, he trumped cynicism with genius.

With a boy's ardor, Messi put Barcelona in the final of the Champions League in Europe — the world's most prestigious club tournament — to be played against Manchester United on Saturday at Wembley Stadium in London. He delivered both goals in Barcelona's 2-0 victory in the first leg of the semifinal round against Real Madrid. This gave Messi a startling 52 goals in his first 50 matches of a season in which he also leads the Spanish league in assists. The [first goal](#) was merely outstanding in its timing and clever anticipation. [The second was a masterpiece](#) of acceleration, power, balance, agility, vision and darting virtuosity.

"I think this genius is impossible to describe," Pep Guardiola, Barcelona's manager, said. "That's why he is a

genius. He has instinct. He loves to live with pressure. He is one of the best ever created.”

That defining Champions League semifinal match was played April 27 at Estadio Santiago Bernabéu in Madrid. Nine months earlier, stars from Barcelona and Real Madrid joined to give Spain its first World Cup title. Together, they lifted the winner’s trophy in South Africa. But now they played for club, not country. Temporary brotherhood fissured. Blood rivalry resumed. Madrid, the capital, was once the base of Franco’s dictatorship and is now the seat of Spain’s constitutional monarchy; Barcelona sits in the heart of the autonomous Catalan region, with its own language and cultural (and soccer) identity.

An Argentine, Messi was not born into these tensions. He came to Barcelona at 13, when the club agreed to pick up the costs of treatment for a growth-hormone deficiency. As the story goes, his contract was written on a napkin. At the time, he was about 4 feet 7 inches. He now stands 5-7. If his lack of size made him shy and self-conscious as a boy, his low center of gravity made him spectacularly elusive as a soccer player.

“We thought he was mute,” said Gerard Piqué, the lanky Barcelona center back who played with Messi in the club’s youth academy. “He was in the dressing room, on the bench, just sitting. He said nothing to us for the first month. We traveled to Switzerland to play a tournament, and he started to talk and have fun. We thought it was another person. He was really good, but he was really small and thin. His legs were like fingers. One coach said, ‘Don’t try to tackle him strong, because maybe you will break him.’ And we said, ‘O.K., but don’t worry because we cannot catch him.’ ”

A decade later, Messi proved even more artful and cagey in the Champions League semifinals after the April match remained scoreless into the 76th minute. As Madrid sat and waited, Barcelona dominated possession with its elegant, patient attack, probing for an away goal that would serve as a tie breaker if needed in the home-and-home series. It was a format meant to encourage aggressiveness in visiting teams and to discourage them from turtling into a defensive shell.

An opening came soon enough. Madrid was vulnerable. In the 61st minute, it had been reduced to 10 men after Pepe, a defender, was red-carded for a cleats-up challenge on Barcelona’s right back, Dani Alves. Pushing into midfield, Pepe had been Madrid’s most effective marker of Messi in two earlier matches during the month, one a tie in a Spanish league game, the other a Real Madrid victory for the Spanish Cup (which was unceremoniously dropped under the team bus during the celebration). But this match was more important, a chance to play for the championship of Europe. Pepe’s eviction was a harsh blow that changed everything.

Madrid’s impulsive manager, José Mourinho, was soon banished, too. He clapped his hands mockingly at the referee’s notice of Pepe’s eviction and at what he considered Alves’s theatrically pained reaction to a

nonexistent foul.

In 2005, while managing Chelsea in the English Premier League, a suspended Mourinho reportedly evaded a prohibition on contact with his players by rolling into the dressing room while hiding inside a laundry basket. Now, against Barcelona, he was reduced to a child's classroom subterfuge of passing furtive notes to his assistant from the stands.

With 14 minutes remaining and the score still 0-0, Messi took what seemed an innocuous pass nearly 40 yards from the goal. It came from Xavi, Barcelona's brilliant playmaker, whose oiled pompadour and wide eyes evoke a young Jackie Gleason, though Gleason's comedy could be manic, even volcanic, while Xavi's art is restrained and surgical.

Messi stabbed forward with the ball, and Madrid midfielder Xabi Alonso tried to make a sliding tackle. Messi wobbled but shrugged off Alonso, keeping his feet. Still, he was not free. Madrid's defense engulfed him like white blood cells trying to fight off infection. His shot ricocheted off a clot of defenders at the top of the penalty area, but Messi remained alert and flicked the rebound back to Xavi.

It was no surprise that Messi connected so assuredly with Xavi. The three players who drive Barcelona's attack — Messi, Xavi and the industrious midfielder Andrés Iniesta — all graduated from the club's youth academy. They are different ages, but they have been in one another's company for a decade.

The heart of Barcelona's defense, Piqué and Carles Puyol, also developed at the academy, which is symbolized by an 18th-century stone farmhouse, known as [La Masia](#), that was remade into a dormitory just outside Camp Nou, Barcelona's stadium. The generic term for the academy is La Cantera. The quarry. It has become the world's model for mining young talent.

Messi grew homesick when he arrived with his father from Argentina, club officials said. He missed his mother and sometimes cried himself asleep. Quickly enough, though, he immersed himself in the Barcelona style, which demands flair and creativity, not mere utility. He played the keep-away game called El Rondo, in which one player stands inside a circle trying to steal passes made in tight spaces. He mastered the system known as tiki-taka, built around short, rhythmic passes and movement described by Iniesta as "receive, pass, offer," triangular exchanges that form a spellbinding geometry.

As Barcelona dispatched Arsenal in the 2010 Champions League quarterfinals, Gunners wing Theo Walcott marveled, "It was like someone was holding a PlayStation controller and moving the figures around."

In the first leg of this year's semifinals, Real Madrid must have felt the same wonder and helplessness, especially down a man. Barcelona completed an astonishing 713 of 788 passes in the match. Xavi alone was

107 for 112. In the 76th minute, upon taking Messi's short pass, Xavi turned his back to the goal and wheeled away from three defenders. Astutely, he played the ball on the right wing to the substitute Ibrahim Afellay. Messi took a few casual strides at the top of the penalty area, but this was a poacher's deceptive saunter.

Alonso put a forearm in Messi's chest for resistance, then backpedaled and turned his head to find the ball. Twelve yards from the goal, Alonso stopped, shuttling Messi off to the final line of Madrid's defense. Space opened in the briefest moment of hesitancy and indecision. That was all Messi needed.

"I knew Afellay would wait until the last second to cross the ball, so I kept running," he said.

He broke for the near goal post, sprinting past defender Sergio Ramos, a boy's sprint, his short legs churning, his hands high and frantic. The cross from Afellay curled in low and precise. Before Iker Casillas, Madrid's goalkeeper, could react, Messi ran onto the ball and jumped and clipped it between Casillas's legs. Barcelona had a vital away goal. Messi jumped into his teammates' arms and pumped his fists. He raised the Barcelona crest on his jersey and pounded his chest.

"No one plays with as much joy as Messi does," Eduardo Galeano, the celebrated Uruguayan novelist and author of "[Soccer in Sun and Shadow](#)," said in an e-mail. "He plays like a child enjoying the pasture, playing for the pleasure of playing, not the duty of winning."

He plays like a child, and, away from the game, he still possesses a child's reserve. Messi is seldom forthcoming. He even appeared distant last Sunday as Barcelona celebrated its latest Spanish league title with a belated festivity at Camp Nou. As confetti rained and his teammates danced and clapped and waved and threw peppers into the stands as a sign of strength, Messi mostly walked alone, his hands shoved into the pockets of his warm-up suit.

"Lio only wants to play," said Thierry Henry, a French star and a former teammate of Messi's at Barcelona who now plays for the Red Bulls of Major League Soccer.

On occasion, Messi does break his reticence. On Thursday, he said he played with the same eagerness that he did in Argentina when he improvised soccer balls from stones and women's tights and cans of cola. "I have fun like a child in the street," he said. "When the day comes when I'm not enjoying it, I will leave football."

Still, he is most often silent, leaving others to provide the soundtrack of his career. Watchers of the bilingual soccer channel GolTV are treated weekly to the cockeyed enthusiasm of the British commentator Ray Hudson. A blog, [Hudsonia](#), was inspired by his ability to "coin phrases that defy both logic and belief" and by his unending quest to "invent a new language in English."

In Hudson's words, Messi has "chameleon eyes" and is as "slippery as an eel covered in Vaseline" and plays with the predatory appetite of a "zombie hunter looking for a Twinkie." Somehow, out of incomprehension comes clarity. Even poetry.

Robert Lalasz, the editor of the Web site [Must Read Soccer](#), has assembled Hudson's verbal improvisations into verse, the way others previously did for the Yankees broadcaster Phil Rizzuto. One of the poems, "He Doesn't Live There," opened this article.

Here is another:

"Neither With Net nor Trident"

*The genius, the genius of
Football
In our modern-day life
Utterly
Unpredictable
He doesn't know
What he's going to do
So how the hell
Do the defenders
You cannot contain him
With a net
Or a trident
He's got pace
He's got power
He's got vision
Technique!
And he's got
Finishing power
His cup
Runneth over ...
Magnificent Messi
Wild man
He doth bstride the Earth
Like a Colossus*

A second goal by Messi followed in the 87th minute, this one with a slalom skier's pivoting and carving and shoulders squared to the fall line. The play began innocently enough, with a bland pass rolled out of the center circle from midfielder Sergio Busquets to Messi. Four Madrid midfielders and four defenders spread across the field ahead of Casillas in goal, an apparently safe but illusory deterrent.

What happened next is why players from the Costa Rican national team had lined up a month earlier for

Messi's autograph in an exhibition against Argentina, reduced to mere fans.

Tall and lean, Busquets jogged languidly from the circle into the space between Madrid's central midfield and defense. Messi's return pass was sharp and direct. Busquets received the ball, pivoted and tapped it lightly. What seemed unthreatening a few seconds earlier now became a menacing give-and-go.

"I saw some options," Messi said. "I always try to create danger."

During the careers of the greats to whom Messi is most often compared — Pelé of Brazil and Diego Maradona, a fellow Argentine — the pace of the game was slower, with more space to operate and more chance for flamboyant playfulness in the flowing dribbles known as gambeta.

Today, soccer increasingly relies on size and muscle and speed. The best players must be able to operate in claustrophobic spaces. That is the mesmerizing skill of Messi, slithering through these airless openings in top gear, changing direction, providing as well as scoring, his left foot tapping the ball on each stride with blurred and evasive touches. At such moments, the ball becomes an extension of his foot.

"You think of Gretzky playing hockey," said Bob Bradley, the coach of the United States national team, who sat in the stadium in Madrid, watching the play unfold. "It sticks with you. Everybody who watches Messi knows he is pushing the highest level of the sport ever."

Earlier in his career, Messi preferred to slash inside from the right wing, taking the ball on his dominant left foot. Now he is considered a center forward in Barcelona's 4-3-3 formation, but the position as he plays it is sometimes described as a "ghost center forward" or a "false No. 9," a reference to the traditional jersey number worn by a striker. Instead, Messi wears No. 10, the classic playmaker's number. He is free to drift and roam and handle the ball, to combine with Xavi and Iniesta, to seek out openings that he can exploit with his passing or his dribbling, with his chameleon eyes.

This puts enormous stress on central defenders. Do they stay put? Do they go with Messi and leave yawning holes on the back line? On this day, with Madrid short a man, every decision was precarious.

"Alarm bells didn't go off fast enough," Bradley said. "Everybody took for granted that they could get there."

Messi took the ball from Busquets about 45 yards from the goal. Four Madrid players surrounded Messi, but he deftly escaped. First, midfielder Lass Diarra was screened by Busquets. He caught up to Messi's right shoulder and reached for the ball, but Messi sensed Diarra's presence and touched it left. To keep from fouling, Diarra retreated with a dainty hop. Alonso quit after a few strides, also hopping in surrender.

Messi gathered speed and intent. Sergio Ramos charged at him, but Messi shielded the ball with the inside of his left foot, pushing it safely to the right. Taking the ball from him had become a blundering game, reaching for a dollar bill attached to a string.

“With someone like that, you want to move them one way, make them predictable, so if they do have a bad touch, you can win the ball,” said Landon Donovan, the American star who has twice played against Messi and Argentina’s national team. “The problem is, the ball is attached to him. Every stride, he’s touching the ball. It’s almost like a magnet is pulling it back in. You’re waiting for the ball to get away, but it doesn’t. If you foul him, his balance is so good, he keeps going. And he keeps going at speed, so you can’t catch him. Sometimes, you run at him like, ‘I’ve got him now,’ and he’ll make a one-time pass. You turn around and the ball comes back, and then he runs by you. There’s a constant mind game that he’s good at.”

Raul Albiol now had his chance in the Madrid defense, but he is 6-2 with a high center of gravity. He backpedaled and crouched, but his balance was all wrong and Messi was coming too fast. Futilely, Albiol thrust out a leg. Messi blew past and Albiol spun around and bent over, all his weight on his right leg. For a moment he seemed to be playing the wrong sport, appearing less a soccer player than a man who had just hurled a javelin.

With another touch, Messi pushed the ball five yards ahead into a vacant spot and sprinted into the penalty area. Marcelo, a defender, desperately rushed from behind, but a foul would have given Messi a penalty kick, so Marcelo pulled back, hands thrown up and knees bent as if parachuting from a plane.

Messi touched the ball with the outside of his left foot, once, twice, and Ramos made one last hustling charge, but he was too late. Sliding to the turf, Messi cuffed the ball with the inside of his right foot. A final drip of the honey, as Hudson sometimes says in his excitable commentary.

The ball seemed to roll under Ramos’s foot, or between his legs. Beaten again, Ramos became tangled with Messi and tumbled in exasperation. Casillas moved to his left in goal, but the shot went to his right, squirting inside the far post. Real Madrid was all but finished in the Champions League. Casillas went to the ground on his backside and rose with his gloved hands upturned in a way that signaled disbelief and anger and resignation. And maybe awe.

On television and radio, Spanish-language broadcasters began their prolonged, ecstatic screams, “Goooooooooooooooool!” extending the sound for an entire breath, but this was more than a goal, it was a supergoal, and so the shrieks became “Gooooooooooooooooolazo!” as Messi again jumped into his teammates’ arms.

“It was all instinct,” Messi said. “Only when I watched it later on television did I know what happened.”

“Vintage Messi”

*How many angels
Can dance on the head of a pin?
How magnificent
Is Messi?
There is no answer
It's like counting the bubbles
In a bottle of Champagne*

With that goal, the question came again. Was Messi the best player ever? The novelist Eduardo Sacheri watched from Buenos Aires and knew that in Argentina, the answer was no. He wrote often about soccer because it reflected the joy and pain of daily life. He loved Messi. He took up for him when his own 14-year-old son, Francisco, asked, “Why is Messi never as good for Argentina as he is for Barcelona?”

But the fact remained: Messi had never won a World Cup, as Maradona had in 1986. And although Messi was influential at the 2010 World Cup, he did not score as [Argentina exited meekly](#) to Germany in the quarterfinals.

“Until Messi wins a World Cup, he doesn’t stand a chance of being compared to Maradona,” Sacheri said.

He still has plenty of time. Messi turns 24 next month. But his relationship with Argentina is complicated. He left when he was a teenager. For many, he is a remote figure.

“Maradona was born in the slums; he has had a chaotic life, anarchic,” Sacheri said. “Failure and success, shadowy and brilliant. Those are things Argentines can relate to and empathize with. If Messi wins a World Cup, he will be an idol. But it might be more difficult for him to have a passionate relationship with the public.”

The debate will never end. That is the beauty of soccer. It demands argument, abhors understatement. Goals are too few and too precious for restrained scrutiny. Entire nations swell and deflate at the sight of ball going into a net. But the next World Cup is not for three years. What to do until then?

“With Lio, the best thing is not to talk about him,” Henry, his former teammate, said. “It is to watch him.”

“Covered With Eyes”

*What he is
He's like something*

*Out of Greek mythology, man
Little short-legged bull
Lionel Messi
Covered with eyes!*