



'Deciding games on his own': Why James Rodriguez's 'special' revival has seen comparisons to Beckham ahead of Copa final

The Colombian captain has gone from club obscurity to the best player at Copa America 2024; so what is behind this stunning turnaround from the forgotten superstar?

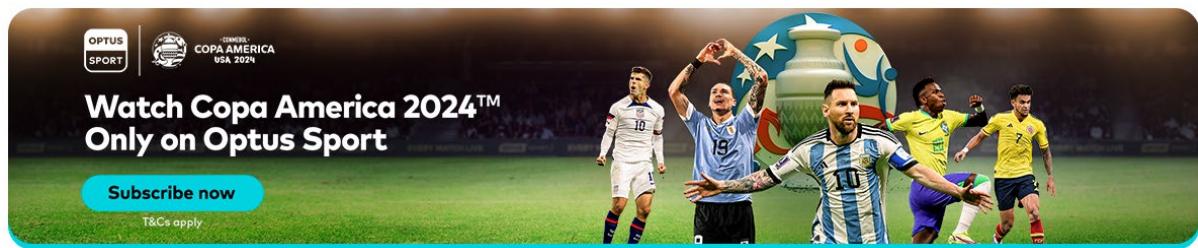
By Kristy Williams
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Ahead of the Copa America 2024 final between Argentina and Colombia, much of the talk surrounds whether it's Lionel Messi's final match; but Los Cafeteros captain James Rodriguez is the man with the stunning redemption story.

The 33-year-old has come from complete club obscurity to return to the international form that enraptured football fans at the 2014 World Cup, where he won the Golden Boot and secured a dream move to Real Madrid.

His performances all tournament have been nothing short of world-class, and ex-Bayern Munich star Johan Baumjohann said it has been quite special to see the fairytale turnaround of the Colombian captain.

"At club level, it's been really disappointing, but it's really refreshing to see players like him (Rodriguez) who have those individual qualities and decide games on their own," he said on [Optus Sport's](#) preview of the final.



Colombia's run to reach Monday's final (all times AEST) has been nothing short of stunning, as is the side's turnaround since Nestor Lorenzo was installed as manager in 2022.

After shockingly failing to qualify for the World Cup in Qatar under Reinaldo Rueda, the revival under Lorenzo has been incredible to watch.

He hasn't lost a single match, with the unbeaten streak now at 28 - easily the longest in the world currently - ahead of their match-up with Argentina.

Colombia have swept aside Uruguay, Panama, Paraguay, Costa Rica and Brazil to reach the final - only the third time they've managed to do so since they first participated in a Copa America in 1945.

Rodriguez has always performed well for his country even as his club career imploded (save for a small period in 2021-22), but he's gone to an almost unthinkable level in this tournament, becoming the first South American to record six assists in a major tournament since the great Pele did it for Brazil in the 1970 World Cup.

Not even the most ardent of Rodriguez fans would've thought it possible given the 33-year-old was languishing on Sao Paulo's bench with very few minutes in Brazil's top flight, but Lorenzo is no ordinary fan - he clearly knew the brilliance within his captain.

"We all know what he (Rodriguez) has to offer, it does not surprise me," Lorenzo told reporters after the side's semi-final win over Uruguay.

"This national team makes him feel a special kind of way. Everybody in Colombia knows that."

So how did Colombia's famous number 10 go from the third most expensive transfer in Real Madrid history to near oblivion before this stunning revival?

Wowing the entire globe at the 2014 World Cup

No football fan will ever forget Rodriguez and the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

Aged just 22, his highlights reel from the tournament is, quite frankly, outrageous.

He wasn't the South American footballer expected to star. Lionel Messi and Neymar Junior were expected to duke it out for the Golden Boot, but Rodriguez overshadowed them all with one of the great individual tournaments.

After impressing at Porto, Rodriguez secured a then AU\$72 million (all amounts in AUD) transfer to French club Monaco, where he performed very strongly in Ligue 1, but out of the eye of most football fans around the world. He wasn't a relative unknown for much longer.



Despite Colombia bowing out in the quarter-finals after a heartbreaking 2-1 loss to Brazil, Rodriguez hammered home six goals and provided two assists from the side's five matches in the tournament as he won the Golden Boot over Germany's Thomas Muller, who played two more games as his country won the title.

Just like this Copa, Rodriguez's set pieces were brilliant; but it was his movement, passing and finishing in the final third that was so magical. He was a man on a mission, and every he did was lethal in its precision - particularly his lofted through-balls and long passing that highlighted his superb vision.

But likely the moment that all football fans will remember was his stunning volley in the Round of 16 against fierce rivals Uruguay when he chested the ball down to himself and smashed it into the top corner from 35 yards out. It easily won the Puskas Award as FIFA's best goal for 2014.

It was a strike so good that Uruguay manager Oscar Tabarez labelled it "one of the greatest goals the World Cup has ever seen", as well as describing Rodriguez as the 'best player in the World Cup'.

Many believe he should've also won the Golden Ball instead of Messi, but in the end, his brilliant tournament secured a move he described as a 'dream': Rodriguez was going to become a Real Madrid galactico.

The newest Galactico

Rodriguez signed a six-year contract to join Real immediately following the World Cup, which was reportedly worth \$120 million (\$152m in today's money, adjusting for inflation).

He was given the No. 10 shirt made famous by such club legends as Clarence Seedorf, Luis Figo and Ferenc Puskas, with the Colombian president saying at the time Rodriguez was changing the history of football in his nation.

It was a signing that promised so much. But unfortunately for Real and Rodriguez, delivered quite little.

Despite breaking a bone in his foot, the Colombian had an impressive first season at the Santiago Bernabeu, kicking 13 goals and providing 13 assists from 29 LALIGA matches as he showed glimpses of his 2014 World Cup form and was named in the league's Team of the Season.

But after that, he was never really given much of a chance under both Rafa Benitez and Zinedine Zidane and didn't take advantage of what chances he did receive for minutes.



He has two Champions League titles to his name but didn't feature in either final. He also has two LALIGA titles to his name but only started in 18 matches across those two seasons.

So ahead of the 2018 World Cup in Russia, Rodriguez asked for a loan so he could get more minutes under his belt. Off he went to Bayern Munich for two seasons, where the decline slowly began.

He struggled with life in Germany, and after showing flashes of promise in some matches, it was clear it wasn't going to work out with either club.

A sad decline

Rodriguez was starting to spend more time off the field than on it, unfortunately; with injuries mounting, form waning and what seemed like disagreements with every manager he played under.

With COVID-19 halting football across the world, his career stalled as a move away from one of Europe's biggest clubs was all but inevitable.

And come September 2020, a move on a free transfer to Everton, who finished mid-table in the Premier League, showed exactly how far he had fallen.

He said at the time a big part of choosing Everton was reuniting with Carlo Ancelotti, and when he was sacked, it was never going to work out.

It was the start of three different, relatively minor clubs, in three seasons; with ill-fated stints at Al-Rayyan in Qatar and Greek champions, Olympiacos following.

Rodriguez was left devastated when left out of Colombia's 2021 Copa America squad, apparently due to a lack of conditioning and game time, publicly slamming then-coach Reinaldo Rueda.

It seemed his international career and a successful club career were over.



Benched in Brazil

After moving to the Brasileiro to play for Sao Paolo this season, more dramas with the manager ensued.

Rodriguez found himself benched, and barely played at all in the month leading up to Copa 2024. It was almost inconceivable just four years after leaving one of Europe's biggest clubs.

But he was brilliant for Colombia all throughout the drama and was their strongest performer during friendlies and World Cup qualifiers.

It's completely puzzling, and Baumjohann said it was 'disappointing' to see how his club career had turned out despite promising so much.

"He was great at Monaco and then he had the 2014 World Cup in Brazil where he was fantastic," the Bundesliga legend said.

"After that, he got bought by Real Madrid, he played for Bayern Munich, but he couldn't be that really world-class player at club level.

"But for the national team, he has always been amazing and one of their best players.

"He's playing in Brazil now after playing in Qatar and Greece, so at club level, it's been really disappointing."

For his part though, Lorenzo said like all humans, the sensitive Rodriguez just wants to be wanted; and it's clear the Colombian manager knows how to get him humming like the circa 2014 version again.

"The last game he (Rodriguez) played in Sao Paulo, he was brought on after 85 minutes. He's not a player to bring on with five minutes remaining," he said recently.

"You have to give him confidence and the team has to recognise him like the player he is. He's not one more player."



Winding back the clock in the USA

And boy is that confidence back in his famous yellow No. 10!

Right from their first match of the tournament, a 2-1 win over Paraguay, it was obvious that Rodriguez was back to the form of old, despite all that he's gone through over the past few years.

It might not be on the globe's biggest stage like 2014, but Copa America is the longest-running tournament in the world; and he has comfortably been the best player, by some margin.

To go with his record-equalling six assists, there is his penalty against Panama in the quarter-final that was struck so sweetly it almost burned through the back of the net.

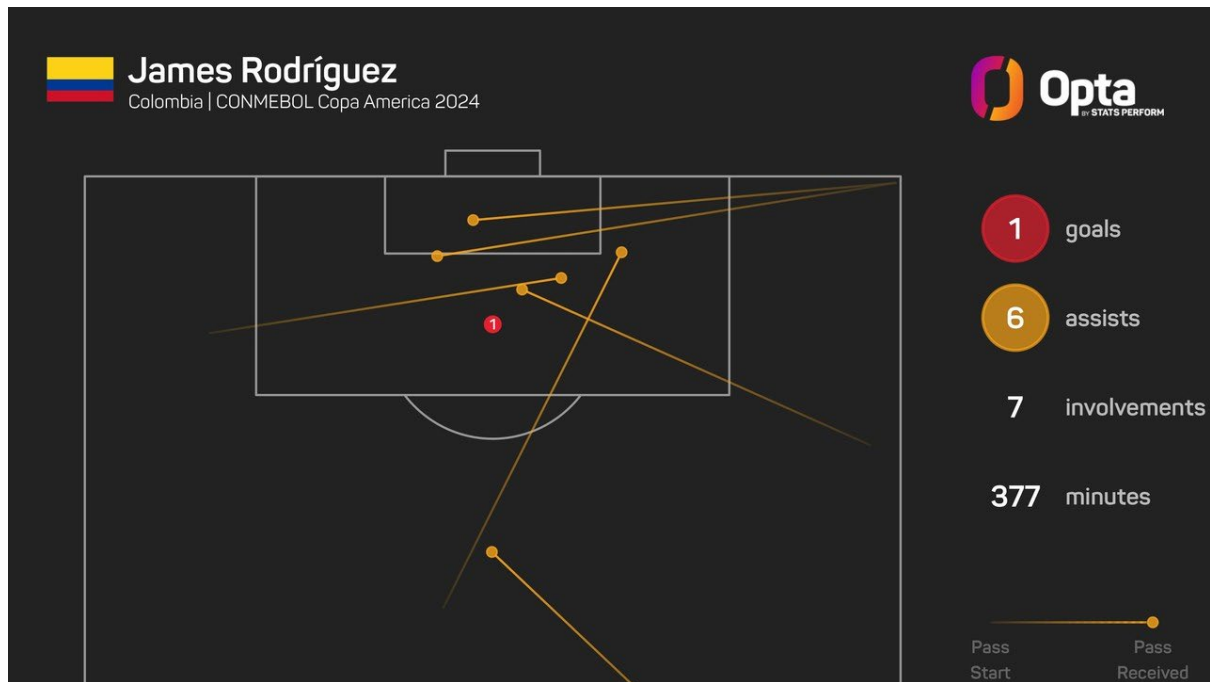
He might line up at right wing on the team sheet, but he essentially plays in a fluid, no 10 role behind the two strikers, with his long and short passing being crucial to each attacking build-up.

Every single one of his set pieces has been lethal, as are his 4.54 successful crosses per match.

They've been so incredibly dangerous that Lorenzo compared them to one of the greatest exponents of them of all time.

"There was another player who was as important with free kicks and corners — David Beckham," he said of Rodriguez's set-piece delivery this tournament.

"Beckham's right foot was wonderful with crosses. James reminds me of him but with his left foot."



The fact he is creating more than four chances a game shows just how crucial he has been to this scintillating Los Cafeteros attack, which Baumjohann said has clearly been the best this tournament.

"Colombia for me has been the most convincing team in this tournament," he said on *Optus Sport's* preview of the match.

They have some fantastic players who have performed well and for me, James Rodriguez has been the best player in this tournament.

"He is definitely someone the Argentinean players need to look out for."

But there's only one thing on James Rodriguez's mind right now, and it isn't the individual accolades, or a potential move back to Europe where he can re-ignite his club career in his twilight years.

He wants a Copa America trophy, 13 years after he made his debut for Colombia.

They haven't reached the final for 23 years, but the last time they did - they won. Will history repeat?

"We are living a dream right now. I have been waiting for this for 13 years," a teary Rodriguez said after the semi-final win over Uruguay.

Imagine all the emotion that would pour out if he indeed does lift the trophy after beating Argentina on Monday morning - it would be quite the special redemption arc.

The match will kick off at 10am on Monday, with all the action live on [Optus Sport](#) from 9.30am.