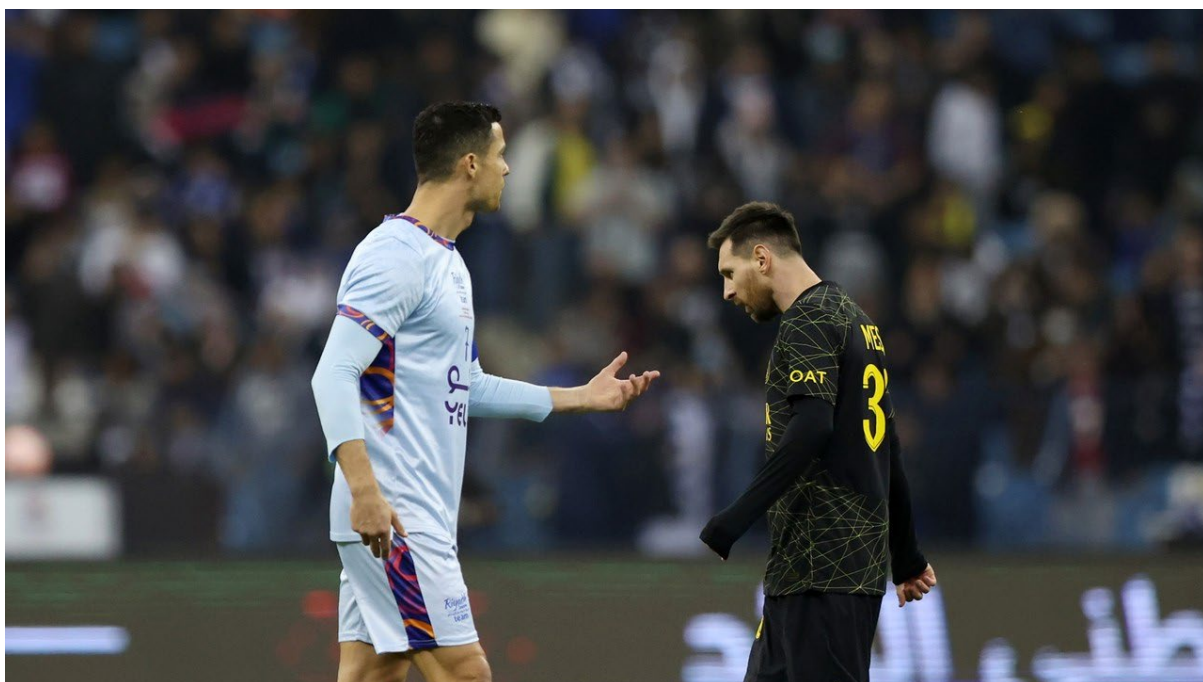




'Something we won't see again' - GOAT debate reignited as legends chase more glory

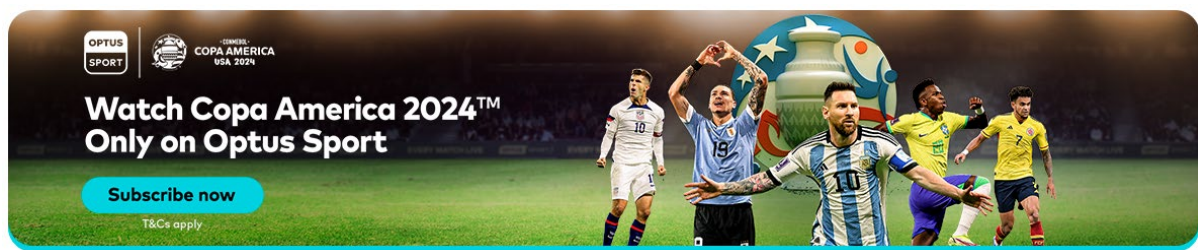
It's an argument that has been raging for almost 20 years, and here, we break down how the two greatest players of their generation compare.

By Kristy Williams
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The weekend of GOATs has arrived; with Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo winding back the clock as football fans reignite a debate that has been raging for almost 20 years.

Messi and Argentina will kick off their Copa America defence at 10am on Friday, June 21 (all times AEST) before Ronaldo will look to improve on Portugal's lacklustre EURO 2024 opener when they take on Turkiye on Sunday at 2am.

It has been one of football's greatest rivalries (albeit always with the greatest of respect), and both had stayed healthy and played at such a 'ludicrously good' level that Spanish football expert Phil Kitromilides says it is 'something we won't see again'.



The pair first met on the field in the 2007/08 Champions League semi-finals when Ronaldo's Manchester United advanced to the final (which they later won) at the expense of Messi and Barcelona.

Just one goal separated the teams across the two legs, and it's a theme of the thinnest margins splitting the pair that still continues to this day.

Ronaldo's then-AU\$152 million (would be worth \$218m in today's money) move to Real Madrid in 2009 saw the pair face-off at least twice every year; giving Spain the most competitive period in El Clasico history.

The would essentially alternate being LALIGA and the Champions League's top scorer every year, highlighting how the football world was splitting hairs when it came down to debating their individual merits.

But some people have no such qualms about picking between the pair.

Kitromilides, who has spent the last 15 years analysing, commentating and writing about Spanish football, took a fraction of a second to nominate his GOAT.

"There's no debate. It's Messi, obviously...he is infinitely more gifted than anyone who has touched a football in the history of humanity," he said on [The Optus Sport Football Podcast](#).

Schwarzer didn't think the debate was as clear-cut, with the Socceroos legend highlighting the growth Ronaldo has had in his game since making his senior debut with Sporting in Portugal in a Champions League qualifier aged 17.

"Yes, you can look at the numbers, appearances, goals, they are similar," Schwarzer said.

"Forget the Ballon d'Or in my opinion...the way it's judged is a bit of a joke.

"What I'll say, though, is the evolution of Cristiano Ronaldo is actually more impressive than Messi's, in my opinion.

"He started off as a winger, (at the time) not necessarily having the ability to get past players; to then evolving into that out-and-out striker, and becoming even more prolific as a goal-scorer than he was before.

"I don't think his (Messi) game changed as much (throughout his career)."

"I'm not saying he is the GOAT ahead of Messi...but the evolution is more impressive."



Kitromilides praised Ronaldo's renowned work ethic, echoing Schawarzer's praise, but said he still fell short of Messi's natural skill and vision.

"Cristiano Ronaldo worked unbelievably hard, had the insane mentality to keep working, keep focused, keep relentlessly trying to improve – and he did," he said.

"And he's become one of the best footballers of all-time.

"His numbers are ridiculous, and what he's achieved is ridiculous and his consistency is almost unsurpassed, but it still doesn't make him a better footballer than Lionel Messi."

Ronaldo said in 2012 that debating between the two was like 'comparing a Ferrari with a Porsche', before insisting he was the better player.

"I think we push each other sometimes...this is why the competition is so high," he said.

The period where they both played in Spain, in particular, was one of the great periods for fans in football history.

Kitromilides said the consistency and quality from both Messi or Ronaldo will never be repeated, despite the talent of players like Erling Haaland and Kylian Mbappe.

"Him (Messi) and Ronaldo were at a very high level for a very, very, very long time and that is something we won't see again," he said.

"I don't think we're going to see Mbappe or Haaland or Vini Jnr or any of these new kids coming through, consistently be ludicrously good for 10-15 years."

Current and former players are split on who should win the debate, including those that have played with both.



A survey by [The Athletic](#) in 2022 found 66 per cent of ex-English footballers thought Ronaldo had had a better career; though 72% would rather have played with Messi; perhaps highlighting the way he brings teammates into the game and makes those around him better.

Ronaldo's Real Madrid teammate Luka Modric said Messi was 'the best player in history' despite winning four Champions League titles alongside the Portugal captain.

It was Gerard Pique, who grew up with Messi at Barcelona before playing at United with Ronaldo, who might have put it best.

"For me, it's like Messi is not human, but Cristiano is the best of the humans," he said.

Despite insisting Ronaldo's arc as a player was better, Schwarzer grudgingly admitted he was siding with the Argentinean, after insisting Brazilian legend Pele was really the game's greatest.

"I'm torn but I think I have to agree that Lionel Messi is the GOAT." he said.

You can watch Messi and Argentina open Copa America 2024 right here on [Optus Sport](#) from 9.30am on June 21, before Portugal take on Turkiye on June 23 at 2am.



The numbers

The resumes of both Ronaldo and Messi are hard to fathom on both an individual level and internationally.

Both have proven themselves in multiple top European leagues and captained their countries to continental titles.

While Messi has the clear lead in the Ballon d'Or stakes, many in the football world are scathing of the voting process for the award, and don't deem it a legitimate talking point to bring into the GOAT debate. Indeed Socceroos legend Mark Schwarzer describes it as a 'joke'.

There is one trophy Ronaldo hasn't managed to get his hands on yet, though: the World Cup. Could that prove to give Messi the edge?

Cristiano Ronaldo stats*

Club career: 910 matches, 700 goals and 198 assists.

Titles: 5x Champions League, 3x Premier League, 2x Serie A, 2x LALIGA, 11x Domestic Cups

International career: 208 matches, 130 goals, 46 assists

Titles: EURO 2016, Nations League 2018-19

Individual accolades: 5x Ballon d'Or, 2x FIFA Best, 4x European Golden Shoe, 15x FIFA World 11, EURO 2020 Golden Boot, 5x League Player of the Season, 6x League Golden Boot, 7x Champions League Golden Boot.

Lionel Messi stats*

Club career: 1064 matches, 837 goals, 374 assists

Titles: 10x LALIGA, 2x Ligue 1, 16x Domestic Cups, 4x Champions League

International career: 182 matches, 108 goals, 54 assists

Titles: 2022 World Cup, Copa America 2021, Olympic Gold (Beijing 2008), CONMEBOL-UEFA Cup of Champions 2022

Individual accolades: 8x Ballon d'Or, 8x FIFA Best, 6x European Golden Shoe, 17x FIFA World 11, 2x World Cup Golden Ball (2014, 2022), 6x Champions League Golden Boot, 9x League Player of the Season, 8x League Golden Boot.

Messi v Ronaldo head-to-head record

- 37 matches
- 17 Messi wins
- 9 draws
- 11 Ronaldo wins
- Both have scored 23 goals

**All stats via [FBREF](#) and accurate as of June 20, 2024.*