BG Pulse Journal USA
ISSN:1947-2536 http://www.bgpulseusa.com/index.php/bg
BG PULSE JOURNAL

THE STORY OF THE BALLON D'OR: THE HISTORY, EVOLUTION, AND PRESTIGE OF FOOTBALL'S ULTIMATE INDIVIDUAL PRIZE

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21351131

Abstract: This article explores the history and development of the Ballon d'Or, widely regarded as the most prestigious individual award in world football. It traces the award's origins, its evolution over the decades, and the criteria used to determine its recipients. Furthermore, the article examines the achievements and remarkable careers of some of the most influential Ballon d'Or winners, highlighting their contributions to the sport and the reasons behind their success. The purpose of this article is to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of the Ballon d'Or, including its significance, selection process, and impact on the world of football. By presenting historical background, notable winners, and the award's enduring legacy, this article aims to help readers appreciate why the Ballon d'Or is considered the highest individual honour a football player can receive.



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Football is the world's most popular sport, bringing together billions of fans from different countries, cultures, and generations. While team achievements such as winning domestic league titles, continental championships, or the FIFA World Cup are celebrated worldwide, individual excellence is also highly valued. Among all personal honours in football, the Ballon d'Or stands as the most prestigious and widely recognized award a player can receive. Winning the Ballon d'Or is regarded as the highest acknowledgment of a footballer's talent, consistency, leadership, and contribution to the game.

Every year, football fans, journalists, players, and coaches eagerly anticipate one of the sport's most exciting announcements: Who will win the Ballon d'Or? My prediction: Lionel Messi. If Argentina wins the World Cup—or even reaches the final with Messi as their standout player—I think he will be the most likely Ballon d'Or winner. The award ceremony sparks intense debates and discussions across television, newspapers, and social media, as supporters compare statistics, trophies, memorable performances, and individual achievements. Although outstanding goals and impressive records play a significant role, the Ballon d'Or represents much more than numbers. It recognizes players who have demonstrated exceptional skill, determination, sportsmanship, and the ability to inspire millions of people around the world.

Since its establishment in 1956, the Ballon d'Or has become a symbol of footballing greatness. Throughout its history, legendary players such as Alfredo Di Stéfano, Johan Cruyff, Michel Platini, Marco van Basten, Zinedine Zidane, Ronaldo Nazário, Ronaldinho, Lionel Messi, and Cristiano Ronaldo have received this distinguished honour, leaving an unforgettable legacy in the history of the sport. Their achievements have inspired generations of young footballers to pursue excellence both on and off the pitch.

However, the Ballon d'Or has not been without controversy. Over the years, debates have emerged regarding the voting process, selection criteria, and whether team success should outweigh individual brilliance. These discussions have only increased the award's significance, making it one of the most closely followed events in international football.

This article explores the rich history and evolution of the Ballon d'Or, examining its origins, development, selection process, and lasting influence on world football. It also highlights some of the award's most remarkable winners and explains why the Ballon d'Or continues to represent the ultimate symbol of individual excellence in the beautiful game.

Keywords: Ballon d'Or; football history; football evolution; individual excellence; sporting achievement; football legends; Lionel Messi; Cristiano Ronaldo; FIFA World Cup; football awards; player recognition; football legacy; global football; sports journalism; football analytics.

2. The History of the Ballon d'Or

The Ballon d'Or is widely regarded as the most prestigious individual award in world football. Presented annually by the French magazine France Football, the award recognises the player who has demonstrated exceptional ability, consistency, and influence throughout the calendar year. For almost seven decades, winning the Ballon d'Or has represented the pinnacle of individual achievement in football, with the trophy becoming a symbol of excellence, dedication, and sporting greatness.

The award was established in 1956 following an innovative idea proposed by the renowned French football journalist Gabriel Hanot, one of the most influential figures in the history of football journalism. Hanot believed that Europe deserved an award that would honour its finest footballer each year. He invited a panel of respected sports journalists from UEFA member nations to vote for the player they considered the best in Europe. This democratic voting system laid the foundation for what would become football's most respected individual accolade. Hanot's vision also helped shape other major competitions, including the European Cup, now known as the UEFA Champions League.

1.2 From European Recognition to Global Glory: The Transformation of the Ballon d'Or

The inaugural Ballon d'Or was awarded on 18 December 1956 to the legendary English winger Sir Stanley Matthews, who was then playing for Blackpool FC. At the age of 41, Matthews became the first recipient of the trophy, recognised for his extraordinary dribbling ability, remarkable sportsmanship, and outstanding contribution to football. His victory marked the beginning of a tradition that has honoured many of the greatest players in football history.

During its early years, the Ballon d'Or was exclusively reserved for European players competing in European leagues. As a result, many legendary footballers from outside Europe, including Pelé and Diego Maradona, were never eligible to receive the award during the peak of their careers. In 1995, the eligibility rules were expanded to include players of any nationality playing for European clubs. A further change in 2007 opened the competition to footballers from clubs all over the world, transforming the Ballon d'Or into a truly global award that recognises excellence regardless of nationality or league.

Today, the Ballon d'Or is far more than a trophy. It represents footballing excellence, leadership, consistency, technical brilliance, and the ability to inspire millions of supporters around the globe. From Sir Stanley Matthews to modern icons such as Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, the history of the Ballon d'Or reflects the evolution of football itself and celebrates the players whose extraordinary performances have shaped the beautiful game for generations.

2. Iconic Winners and Their Achievements: The Players Who Defined Generations

Throughout its long and prestigious history, the Ballon d'Or has been awarded to some of the greatest footballers the world has ever witnessed. However, the trophy represents more than individual brilliance; it reflects the influence, legacy, and unforgettable moments created by players who transformed the sport. From Lionel Messi's extraordinary creativity to Cristiano Ronaldo's relentless pursuit of perfection, each winner has contributed to the evolution of modern football in a unique way.

Lionel Messi: The Record-Breaking Genius

Among all Ballon d'Or winners, Lionel Messi stands alone as the most decorated player in history, having claimed the award a record eight times. His achievements represent an extraordinary combination of technical ability, consistency, creativity, and longevity. For more than a decade, Messi dominated world football with his exceptional dribbling, vision, passing ability, and remarkable goal-scoring record.

Although many of his Ballon d'Or victories were based on his incredible club performances with FC Barcelona, his most symbolic triumph came in 2023, when he received recognition for leading Argentina to victory at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. After years of international disappointment, Messi finally lifted football's most prestigious international trophy, scoring seven

goals and playing a decisive role throughout the tournament. This victory strengthened his position among football's all-time greats because it completed the one achievement that had previously been missing from his legendary career.

In my opinion, Messi's greatest contribution to football is not only his statistics but also the way he changed people's understanding of creativity in the game. He proved that a player could control matches through intelligence, imagination, and technical mastery rather than relying only on physical strength.

Cristiano Ronaldo: The Symbol of Relentless Excellence

If Messi represents natural genius, Cristiano Ronaldo represents determination, discipline, and ambition. The Portuguese superstar has won the Ballon d'Or five times, establishing himself as one of the most complete and consistent goalscorers in football history.

Ronaldo's victories were built on extraordinary numbers, including record-breaking goal totals, incredible physical preparation, and remarkable performances in the UEFA Champions League. His most dominant period came during his time at Real Madrid, where he became the club's greatest goalscorer and played a crucial role in their historic achievement of winning three consecutive UEFA Champions League titles from 2016 to 2018.

What makes Ronaldo's career exceptional is his ability to reinvent himself. He developed from a talented winger into a world-class goalscorer, demonstrating that dedication and professional discipline can extend a player's career at the highest level.

2.1 Johan Cruyff and Michel Platini: The Architects of Football Excellence

Before the Messi–Ronaldo era, two European legends dominated the Ballon d'Or: Johan Cruyff and Michel Platini, both of whom won the award three times.

Cruyff was not only a brilliant player but also a revolutionary thinker who changed the philosophy of football. His performances with Ajax and the Netherlands became closely associated with "Total Football," a tactical approach based on movement, flexibility, and intelligent positioning. His influence extended beyond his playing career, shaping modern football philosophy and inspiring future generations of coaches and players.

Michel Platini, meanwhile, represented the golden era of creative midfielders. During the 1980s, he was considered the ultimate midfield master, combining elegant technique, leadership, and exceptional goal-scoring ability. His three consecutive Ballon d'Or victories from 1983 to 1985 demonstrated his dominance during that period.

These legends remind us that greatness in football is not defined only by goals and statistics; it is also measured by influence and the ability to change the way the game is played.

3. The Golden Debates: Controversial Ballon d'Or Decisions

Despite its prestige, the Ballon d'Or has always been surrounded by debate. The difficulty of choosing the world's best player lies in one fundamental question: Should the award recognise the best individual performer, the player with the greatest team achievements, or the one who creates the most unforgettable moments?

Because football combines individual talent with collective success, disagreements among fans and experts are inevitable. Several Ballon d'Or decisions have become particularly controversial.

2010: Messi vs Wesley Sneijder and Andrés Iniesta

The 2010 Ballon d'Or remains one of the most debated decisions in the award's history. Wesley Sneijder enjoyed a remarkable season with Inter Milan, winning the historic treble of the UEFA Champions League, Serie A, and Coppa Italia, while also reaching the FIFA World Cup

final with the Netherlands. Andrés Iniesta also had a memorable year, scoring the winning goal in the 2010 World Cup final as Spain became world champions.

However, Lionel Messi won the award after producing extraordinary individual statistics, scoring around 60 goals during the calendar year and continuing his dominance with Barcelona.

Critics argued that team success should have been valued more highly, while supporters of Messi believed that individual brilliance was the main purpose of the award. This debate highlighted the ongoing tension between personal achievement and collective trophies.

2021: Messi vs Robert Lewandowski

The 2021 Ballon d'Or created another major discussion, particularly because the 2020 award was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite Robert Lewandowski being widely considered the favourite after an incredible season with Bayern Munich.

Lewandowski continued his outstanding form by breaking Gerd Müller's Bundesliga scoring record with 41 league goals in the 2020–21 season. Nevertheless, Messi won his seventh Ballon d'Or, largely because of his emotional achievement of winning his first major international trophy with Argentina at the 2021 Copa América.

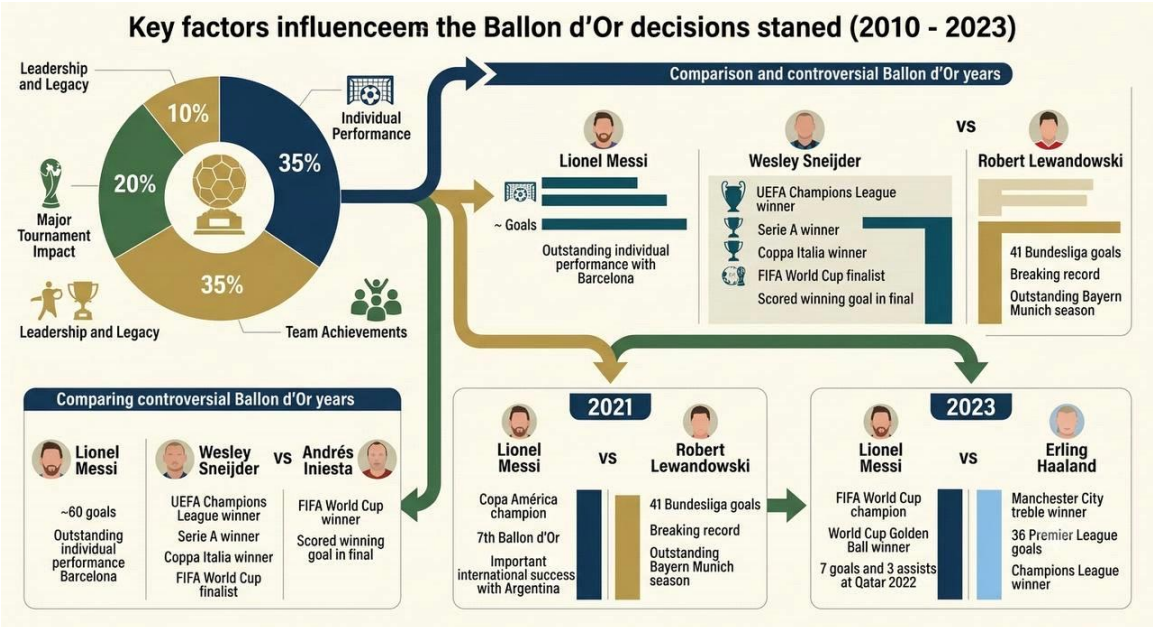
Interestingly, Messi himself acknowledged Lewandowski's achievements and stated that he deserved recognition for his incredible 2020 season. This moment demonstrated the respect between elite players despite competitive debates.

2023: Messi vs Erling Haaland

The 2023 Ballon d'Or debate represented a clash between two different definitions of greatness. Erling Haaland enjoyed a historic season with Manchester City, winning the Premier League, FA Cup, and UEFA Champions League treble while breaking the Premier League record for goals in a single season with 36 goals.

However, Messi's victory was influenced by his unforgettable World Cup performance in Qatar, where he finally achieved international glory with Argentina. The decision showed that major international tournaments continue to have enormous influence on Ballon d'Or voting.

Ultimately, both players represented different forms of excellence: Haaland demonstrated unstoppable goalscoring power, while Messi delivered one of football's greatest individual stories.



3.1 The Future of the Ballon d'Or: The Need for Evolution

Although the Ballon d'Or remains the most prestigious individual award in football, it faces important challenges in the modern era. The biggest question concerns the criteria used to determine the winner. Should statistics, trophies, leadership, consistency, or performances in major tournaments receive the greatest importance?

Another important issue is positional balance. Attackers, especially forwards who score goals, traditionally receive more attention because their contributions are easier to measure. Meanwhile, defenders, midfielders, and goalkeepers often struggle to receive equal recognition despite playing crucial roles.

For example, legendary defenders such as Paolo Maldini and Virgil van Dijk have demonstrated that defensive excellence can be just as influential as attacking brilliance.

To make the award more balanced, some experts suggest creating clearer evaluation criteria or introducing additional categories for different positions. Greater use of advanced football statistics could also help voters analyse performances more objectively.

In the future, the Ballon d'Or may need to adapt to the changing nature of football. However, regardless of possible reforms, its importance will remain unchanged. The award is not simply about winning a trophy; it is about celebrating the players who inspire generations, redefine excellence, and leave an unforgettable mark on the beautiful game.

4. The World Cup's Influence on the Ballon d'Or

The FIFA World Cup has always played a significant role in shaping the outcome of the Ballon d'Or. Although the award is designed to recognise the best individual player over a calendar year, performances at the World Cup often carry extraordinary importance because the tournament represents the highest level of international football. Every four years, the world's greatest players have the opportunity to create historic moments on the biggest stage, and these performances can dramatically influence voters' decisions.

The 2026 FIFA World Cup is expected to be one of the most influential tournaments in recent Ballon d'Or history. With many of the world's elite players representing their countries, the competition will not only determine the next world champion but could also decide the strongest candidates for football's most prestigious individual award. However, simply winning the World Cup is not always enough to guarantee a Ballon d'Or victory. History has shown that the player must also be one of the tournament's outstanding performers, demonstrating individual brilliance, consistency, leadership, and the ability to influence crucial matches.

A perfect example is Lionel Messi's 2022 Ballon d'Or victory, which was largely influenced by his unforgettable World Cup campaign in Qatar. Argentina's triumph was important, but Messi's personal contribution made the difference. He scored seven goals, provided decisive assists, won the Golden Ball as the tournament's best player, and guided his team through difficult moments. This demonstrates that the Ballon d'Or often rewards not only success but also the individual who becomes the symbol of that success.

In 2026, several football nations appear capable of producing the next Ballon d'Or winner. France, Argentina, Spain, and England are among the strongest contenders, each possessing world-class talent capable of dominating the tournament.

France enters the competition as one of the favourites because of its incredible depth and attacking quality. Players such as Kylian Mbappé and Ousmane Dembélé could become major candidates if France achieves World Cup glory. Dembélé has already strengthened his reputation after a successful season with Paris Saint-Germain, while Mbappé continues to prove himself as one of the most dangerous forwards in world football. If either player delivers a memorable World Cup performance, especially by scoring decisive goals in knockout matches, they could become serious Ballon d'Or contenders.

Argentina also has a unique opportunity to create football history. If Argentina wins the World Cup again, Lionel Messi could potentially compete for a record ninth Ballon d'Or. Although age is often considered a challenge for footballers, Messi's intelligence, creativity, and ability to influence games remain extraordinary. A successful World Cup campaign, combined with leadership and important contributions, could strengthen the argument that his greatness continues beyond traditional expectations.

Spain represents another fascinating possibility, especially because of the emergence of young talents such as Lamine Yamal. His technical ability, confidence, and creativity have already made him one of football's most exciting young players. However, winning the Ballon d'Or requires more than potential; it requires a complete season of outstanding performances. Therefore, Yamal's chances would depend heavily on his impact during the World Cup, particularly in decisive matches.

In my opinion, France has one of the strongest chances of winning the 2026 World Cup. Their squad combines experience, young talent, physical strength, and tactical flexibility. They have reached the final of two recent World Cups and continue to produce world-class players. However, football is unpredictable, and teams such as England, Argentina, and Spain have the quality to challenge for the trophy.

Ultimately, the 2026 World Cup could become the defining moment of the next Ballon d'Or race.

The player who lifts the trophy while delivering exceptional individual performances will have the strongest argument for football's greatest individual honour. In the history of the Ballon d'Or, unforgettable moments on the world stage have often created legends, and 2026 may introduce the next name to join that exclusive list.

4.1 Future Perspectives: The Changing Landscape of Football

As football continues to evolve, future research and discussions should explore how the sport, individual recognition, and awards such as the Ballon d'Or will develop in the coming decades. Modern football is changing rapidly due to advances in technology, data analysis, sports science, and tactical innovation. These changes will influence not only how players perform but also how greatness is measured and recognised.

One important area for future consideration is the role of advanced football analytics in evaluating players. Traditional statistics such as goals, assists, and trophies remain important, but modern analysis can provide deeper insights into a player's overall contribution, including creativity, defensive work, pressing ability, passing accuracy, and influence on team performance. In the future, a combination of human expertise and technological data may help create a more complete and objective evaluation system for individual awards.

Another significant area of development is achieving greater recognition for players in different positions. Historically, forwards and attacking players have dominated the Ballon d'Or because goals often receive the most attention from voters and fans. However, football is a team

sport where defenders, midfielders, and goalkeepers play equally essential roles. Future discussions may focus on creating a more balanced system that values every aspect of the game and gives more opportunities for players from different positions to receive global recognition.

The future of football will also be shaped by the emergence of a new generation of talents. Young stars such as Lamine Yamal and other developing players represent a new era of footballers who combine technical ability with modern physical and tactical qualities. Future research could examine how youth development systems, international academies, and professional training methods contribute to producing the next generation of football legends.

Furthermore, the relationship between football and technology will become increasingly important. Artificial intelligence, wearable performance trackers, virtual reality training, and improved injury prevention methods may transform how players prepare and compete at the highest level. These innovations could extend athletes' careers and create new standards for excellence.

Ultimately, the future of football will not only be about finding the next Ballon d'Or winner but also about understanding how the concept of greatness changes over time. The players of the future will be judged not only by their statistics but also by their influence, leadership, innovation, and ability to inspire global audiences. As the beautiful game continues to grow, football's greatest challenge will be preserving its traditions while embracing new ideas and opportunities.

5.Conclusion: The Eternal Legacy of the Ballon d'Or

From its humble beginnings as a simple journalists' vote in 1956 to becoming a global celebration watched by millions of football fans around the world, the Ballon d'Or has transformed into much more than an individual award. Over nearly seven decades, it has become the ultimate symbol of football excellence, recognising not only exceptional talent but also dedication, consistency, leadership, and the ability to create unforgettable moments on the pitch.

The history of the Ballon d'Or is a reflection of the evolution of football itself. From the era of legends such as Stanley Matthews, Johan Cruyff, and Michel Platini to the modern dominance of Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, every winner has represented a different definition of greatness. Some players have been recognised for their extraordinary statistics, others for their tactical intelligence, creativity, leadership, or their ability to inspire their teams during the most important moments. Therefore, the Ballon d'Or is not simply a reward for individual success; it is a celebration of the players who influence generations and leave a permanent mark on the beautiful game.

Although debates and controversies will always surround the award, these discussions demonstrate its importance. The fact that millions of supporters continue to analyse every decision proves that the Ballon d'Or represents more than a trophy — it represents dreams, ambition, and the endless pursuit of perfection. Whether the debate focuses on goals, trophies, World Cup performances, or individual brilliance, the award continues to create conversations that connect football fans across different cultures and countries.

In the modern era, where football continues to develop through new technologies, advanced statistics, and emerging talents, the Ballon d'Or will also continue to evolve. Future generations of players will compete for the honour of joining the exclusive group of football icons who have lifted the famous golden trophy.

Ultimately, the Ballon d'Or is not merely an object made of gold and brass; it is a permanent symbol of football immortality. Winning it means becoming part of history — a name remembered not only for achievements but also for the emotions, inspiration, and unforgettable memories created for millions of people around the world. For every young footballer dreaming of greatness, the Ballon d'Or remains the highest mountain to climb and the ultimate dream to achieve.

Acknowledgement. The authors sincerely thank teacher Khalikova Vazira for her expert guidance, insightful suggestions, and thorough review, which greatly contributed to the preparation of this manuscript.

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