

By JOHN MULLER | The Athletic

If there were any doubts that Lionel Messi came to MLS to play, they vanished in the first game of this season, when he made a fully grown man disappear.

The play was one of those slapstick transitions that U.S. soccer has elevated to some kind of dadaist art form. A Real Salt Lake defender collapsed in a heap for no clear reason, and the goalkeeper was caught scrambling as the ball fell to Messi, who beat a man by cutting backward at an implausible angle.

The only obstacle standing — well, lying — between him and goal was the crumpled defender. Andrew Brody, who was still writhing in pain at the edge of the penalty area.

There had been no whistle. Play on. Instead of acknowledging the fallen opponent, Messi produced one of the most hilariously disrespectful moments of his career. He flipped the ball over Brody's body with one gloriously weighted touch, skipped around him and collected the ball in stride to rifle a shot at goal.

"For those asking," Brody posted later as the footage went viral, "yes, I was the cone on the ground there."

Even Messi's Inter Miami teammates couldn't believe what they had just seen. "I was like, 'Oh my god, he just chipped the guy at full speed and got a shot off,'" said midfielder Julian Gressel, who was standing a few yards away.

This is what happens when the greatest player ever to kick a ball takes his talents to South Beach. At 36, Messi could skip training to sip yerba mate under an umbrella, and fans would still flock to see him play for Inter Miami. Instead, like late-career LeBron James or Tom Brady, he is stubbornly adding to his legacy long after other players' bodies would have given up.

A few months after winning his eighth Ballon d'Or, Messi continues to evolve his game in interesting ways. He'll be back in the global spotlight this summer when he joins Argentina for the Copa America, but even against the likes of Sporting Kansas City and New England Revolution, every minute of football he has left in him is giddy, unmissable fun.

Oh, and along the way, Messi just might be putting together the greatest season in MLS history.

To anyone who watched



Inter Miami forward Lionel Messi laughs while talking to forward Luis Suarez as the pair sits on the bench ahead of a Major League Soccer match against the Colorado Rapids on April 6 in Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

## How Lionel Messi is putting together greatest season in MLS history

Barcelona in the past decade, Inter Miami's team sheet can look uncannily familiar. In front of Messi, his old strike partner Luis Suarez is still scoring goals at a frightening clip. Behind them, defensive midfielder Sergio Busquets arranges the game with keisirey precision. Jordi Alba can't bomb forward from left back like he used to, but he remains Messi's favorite target in the final third. Even the manager, Tata Martino, coached most of these guys at Barcelona in the 2013-14 season.

But that's pretty much where the similarities end. Instead of a bunch of La Miesia-trained wizardings, Inter Miami has surrounded their aging stars with a platoon of young, athletic prospects from South America. The result is a looser, more end-to-end team than any Messi has ever

played his club soccer with.

For most of his career, Messi rarely needed to get involved until his team had tiki-taka-ed its way past the halfway line. He could stroll around the attack like an officer conducting an inspection, watching how defenders moved and calculating where to appear on the ball at exactly the right moment to finish a move.

In Miami's less finely tuned build-up, he's getting involved earlier than ever before. Instead of receiving on the wing to dribble across the face of the defense, he will often wave Gressel, who plays right midfield, up to the front line and drop alongside Busquets to work the ball out of the back with short passes.

Unlike at Paris St.-Germain, where he could launch

intercontinental through-balls to Kylian Mbappe, or with Argentina, where such players as Julian Alvarez and Lautaro Martinez run the channels ahead of him, Messi does less shotgun quarterbacking for Miami. Instead of looking long from the middle third, he will weave through the lines with quick one-twos that skip around defenders without risking tackles and fouls.

"He likes to do that, where he picks up speed through a wall pass," Gressel said. "I become like a bouncer, in a sense. It's about getting him into space on the half-turn and moving forward."

Once Messi gets rolling between the lines, his eye for passing lanes is as deadly as ever. He's averaging almost one through-ball per 90 minutes played. His 10 assists — 12

### COMMENTARY

if you count secondary assists, as MLS does — lead the league. Five of them came in a single half, when he shredded the New York Red Bulls like a bored house cat.

The best of the bunch, an assist to Paraguayan midfielder Matias Rojas, was a perfect souvenir of Messi in his Miami era. He picked up the ball on the left side of the halfway line, miles from danger. He turned back toward midfield, but instead of circulating the ball to Busquets, he bounced an unexpected one-two off Rojas. Just like that, he was suddenly dribbling downhill at an exposed defense.

Rojas knew what to do after playing the return pass. As opponents collapsed on Messi, his teammate just kept sprinting for goal. Messi turned to his left and then sliced a through-ball back to his right at an angle only he could have seen — almost exactly the same angle as his assist to Nahuel Molina against the Netherlands at the last World Cup.

The entire move from the center stripe to goal, through seven opponents, took just three passes between two players.

This is the final evolution of Messi: not a false nine or a dribbling winger but a relentless ball-progressor through the heart of the field. Over and over again, he finds a way to shake loose and receive the ball in midfield, dribble through the lines and unload a killer pass toward the left side of the box.

But of course even that under-sells the impact of a guy who is also among the league's leading scorers. Messi's 10 goals in nine appearances this season put him at 1.18 goals per 90 minutes played. Instead of settling for increasingly long shots through packed defenses like at latter-day Barcelona, he is breaking into the penalty area more regularly.

What has become perfectly clear is that Messi is retiring the league instead of the other way around.

Inter Miami's team of Barcelona legends probably won't go down as the greatest in MLS history — they're too shaky in the buildup and porous at the back — but for now they're top of the league and appointment viewing every time Messi steps on the pitch. Maybe that's the best measure of the greatest players: You just can't take your eyes off him, even to the end.

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