



Roberta Macedo // Graphics Editor

Messi's magic touch on Miami and MLS

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How it all began

Like most things, Inter Miami started as an idea. An MLS team in South Florida always made sense because of its diverse community, but when it actually happened with the founding of the Miami Fusion in 1997, the team floundered.

Inter Miami's journey began in 2014 when soccer legend David Beckham announced his intent to found an MLS team in South Florida. TBut to avoid following in the Miami Fusion's footsteps, Beckham needed to generate stronger publicmore interest in the MLS.

"There was always the question of can MLS really make it here because the fans here are so into the foreign game, the international game, and would they be interested in the domestic game?" Michelle Kaufman, a 35-year sports journalist who covers Inter Miami for the Miami Herald, said.

"That's been a big challenge for MLS in a market like Miami ... a lot of people for a long time would rather sit at home and watch the [English Premier League] or La Liga on TV, rather than go and support a live MLS game."

Beckham partnered with Miami-based business magnates Jorge and Jose Mas, and Inter Miami was officially announced as Major League Soccer's 25th club in 2018. The team

began its inaugural season in 2020 with a 1-0 loss to Los Angeles FC on March 1.

The next three-and-a-half years were tough. Inter Miami missed the playoffs its first two seasons before finally breaking through in 2022, when it lost 3-0 to New York City FC in the first round.

Midway through the 2023 season, Inter

Miami sat dead last in the Eastern Conference. A four-game slide in May led to the firing of third-year coach Phil Neville, leaving the future of the club in a state of uncertainty.

"For three-and-a-half years they've tried two different coaches, all different lineups, bringing in all different players, and it just wasn't happening," Kaufman said. "They were in last place, dead last, and it just kept feeling like this team is just cursed. This is never going to happen."

Enter Lionel Messi.

Raul Maristany // Inter Miami CF
Lionel Messi celebrates his goal as fans cheer him on at DRV PNK Stadium on July 25, 2023



The Messi Effect

Rumors swirled that Messi would join Inter Miami's roster over the summer, but many, including Kaufman, weren't so sure.

"It was hard to believe that [Messi] would come to Fort Lauderdale and play in a temporary stadium for the last place team. It just didn't seem to make any sense really, except that he loves Miami," Kaufman said. "I was very skeptical even when the Mas brothers were feeling optimistic and confident."

After his contract for French club Paris Saint-Germain expired in June, Messi received enticing offers from Saudi Pro League club Al-Hilal and his former team, FC Barcelona.

Al-Hilal had the money, with a deal reportedly worth over \$400 million per year according to soccer insider Fabrizio Romano, but FC Barcelona provided a sense of familiarity. Messi spent the first 21 years of his historic career playing for the Spanish club, where he won a team-record 34 trophies, including 10ten league titles. However, signing Messi proved difficult with FC Barcelona over its salary limit, and the deal never transpired.

On June 7, Messi made his decision: — he was headed to Inter Miami on a contract worth over \$125 million that would run through the 2025 MLS season. Messi officially signed with the club on July 15.

Chaos immediately ensued immediately. Ticket sales rose 1000% hours after Messi's decision, and prices started at \$570 for the club's recent road game against Los



Raul Maristany // Inter Miami CF

Inter Miami CF owner Jorge and Jose Mas, and David Beckham celebrate with Lionel Messi as he is presented to fans at DRV PNK Stadium on July 16, 2023

Angeles FC on Sept. 3.

The club's social media platforms grew exponentially, too. Inter Miami now has 14.8 million Instagram followers, which is over 13 million more than the second-most followed team in the MLS, the LA Galaxy. Inter Miami also has more Instagram followers than every NFL, NHL and MLB team, which includes historic franchises like the Dallas Cowboys and New York Yankees.

Local businesses are capitalizingare also capitalizing on all the excitement. Fritz and Franz Bierhaus, a German restaurant in Coral Gables, is now packed for every Inter Miami game. Whenever the club scores a goal, Latin music blares from the speakers as the crowd whips into a frenzy. It's becoming a common scene throughout South Florida.

"All these sports bars are now having watch parties and getting crowds for MLS games because of Messi, pure and simple. So it's helping the owners of all those establishments," Kaufman said. "And then sporting good stores that are selling Messi merchandise, like Soccer Locker which is on U.S. 1 ... you can't find any Inter Miami gear at all. It's completely sold out."

At Messi's introduction ceremony at DRV PNK Stadium on July 16, Miami's elements greeted the soccer legend with severe thunderstorms and heavy rain. But that didn't stop fans from piling into the stadium.

"It was chaos," Bea, who attended the ceremony, said. "Getting there was a five-hour ordeal. It was lines and lines and lines out the stadium entrance for miles like three hours before [the event]."

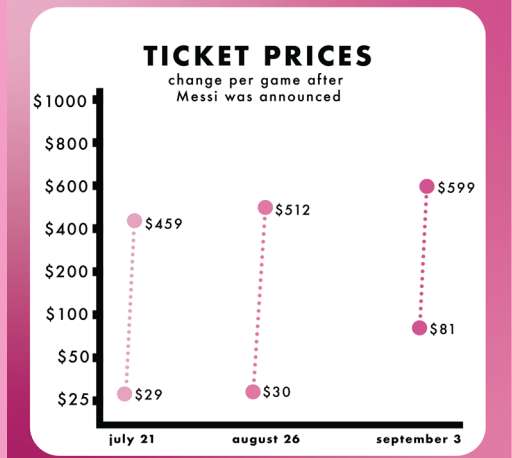
For all the time it took fans to arrive, the ceremony itself didn't even last 20 minutes. Just seeing Messi, perhaps the greatest player of all time for the world's most popular sport, was enough.

"There were people crying next to us. There were people screaming," Bea said. "So even though it was [short] and it was kind of chaos with all the people, and it was storming and raining and definitely uncomfortable in other senses, it definitely made it worth it."

And as Messi's done his whole career, he's surpassed all expectations. He scored 11 goals and six assists in his first nine games — all Inter Miami victories. That included a dominant showing in the Leagues Cup, an international tournament that gave Inter Miami its first trophy in club history. And of course it was Messi who scored Inter Miami's only goal in the final, dribbling around defenders for a mesmerizing shot just outside the penalty box.

Inter Miami now has the tall task of securing a playoff spot after sitting in the MLS basement for much of the season. Regardless of the outcome, South Florida soccer has changed forever — and it's all because of one man.

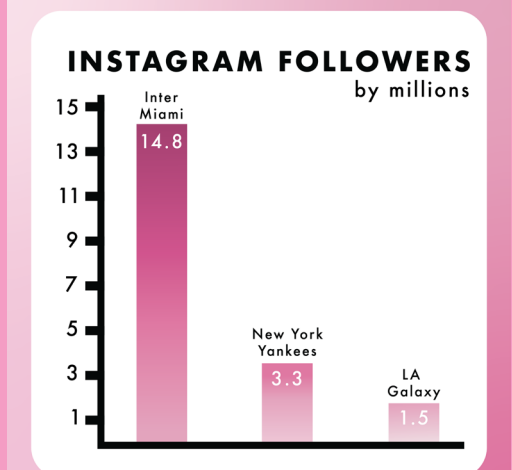
Since Messi joined Inter Miami, ticket prices have skyrocketed. Fans who could once watch a game for less than \$30 are now paying more than \$100.



10

Looking for Messi's number 10? Messi jerseys sold out until October

Anyone searching for the iconic pink jersey will have to wait until October for it to come back in stock. After announcing his intention of signing with Miami, online retailer Soccer.com sold six months' worth of Inter Miami jerseys in one day.



Since Messi joined, the Inter Miami Instagram following has grown by the millions, passing iconic fanbases like the New York Yankees.

"Everyone was crying - I was crying. It was very emotional to see."

"[Messi] just seemed very comfortable and happy where he was."

Laura Bea
Student and season ticket holder

Low attendance and revenue led to the contraction of the Fusion by the MLS after the 2001 season, even though Miami finished atop the league for the regular season. Eight years laterYears later in 2009, an expansion bid led by soccer club FC Barcelona failed to bring back an MLS team back to Miami.

His first game in an Inter Miami uniform, soccer superstar Lionel Messi prepared to take a free kick.

It had been one week since the former World Cup Champion officially signed with the Major League Soccer (MLS) club after years of rumors. Now, on a warm and sticky night in late July, Messi was seconds away from giving the sold-out crowd at DRV PNK Stadium its first taste of his magic.

Using his patented left foot, Messi delivered a 25-yard strike that sailed into the net's top left corner to break the tie and all but give Inter Miami the victory in the match's closing moments. Fans, many wearing Messi's iconic blue and white-striped Argentina jersey, rejoiced as he raced around the field and embraced his new teammates.

"Everyone was crying — I was crying. It was very emotional to see," Laura Bea, an Inter Miami season-ticket holder, said. "[Messi] just seemed very comfortable and happy [with] where he was."

After decades of struggle for South Florida soccer, Inter Miami was now on the world stage.