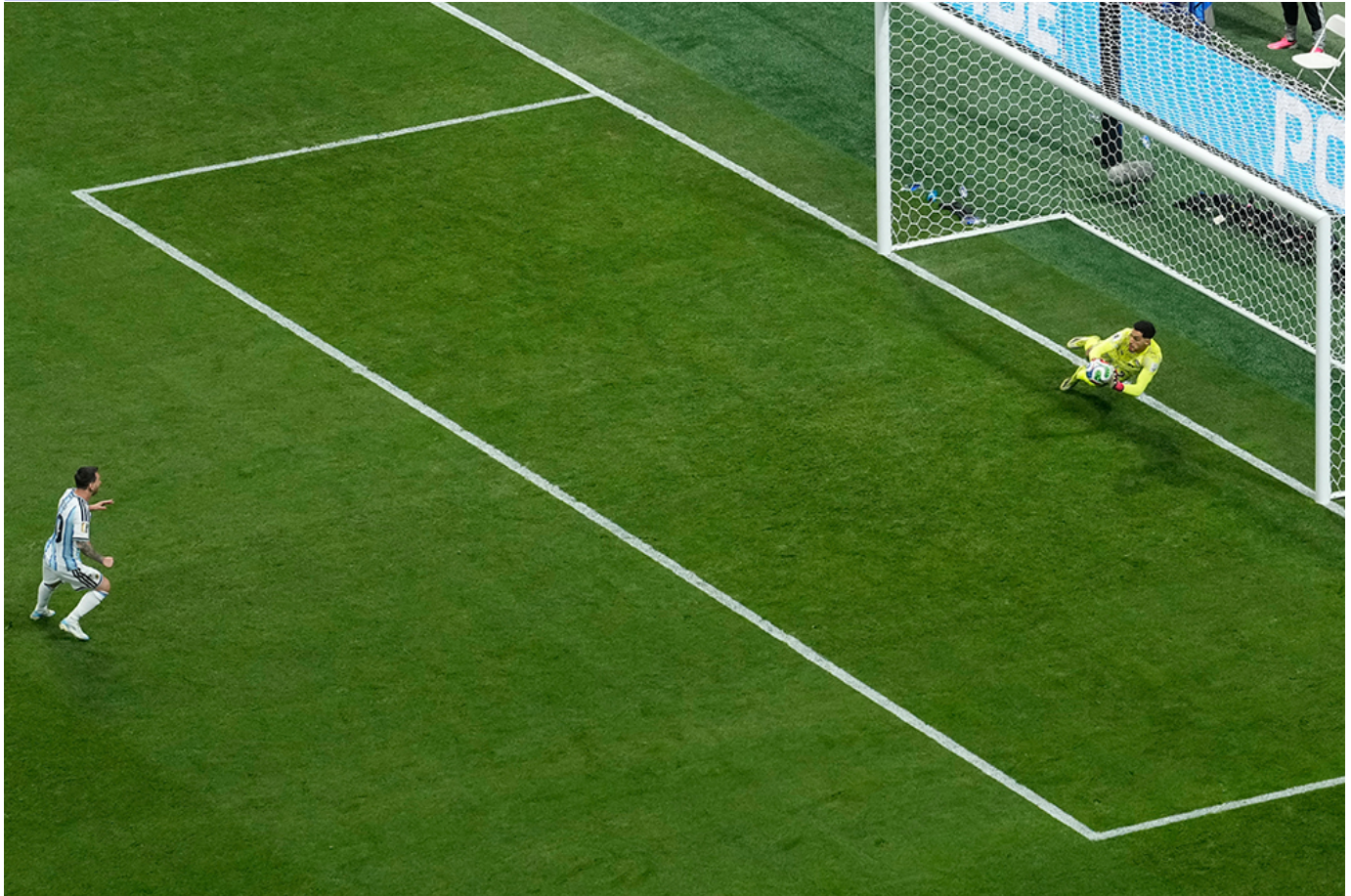


[Culture](#)



Egypt goalkeeper Mostafa Shoubir (23) saves a penalty kick by Argentina's Lionel Messi (10) during the World Cup round of 16 soccer match between Argentina and Egypt in Atlanta, July 7, 2026. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson)



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As the England-Norway [quarterfinal](#) ticked toward the end of the 90-minute regulation last week, my 9-year-old asked "Is it time for penalty kicks? The penalty kicks are exciting." The implied slight — that the game itself isn't always thrilling — has been expressed by plenty of casual adult viewers as well.

While I agree that penalty kicks are exciting, they never feel like a truly fitting way to decide a match. After 120 minutes of a game (including a 30-minute overtime) defined by collaboration and teamwork, ending with a solo confrontation between kicker and goalie leaves much to be desired. Penalty kicks test nerves and luck, but not the ability of a team to play the game of soccer. It's like deciding a March Madness basketball game with a free throw contest.

In most competitive soccer matches ties are a perfectly acceptable result, so penalty kick shootouts — used in the knockout rounds of tournaments — are pretty rare. Even in-game penalty kicks as a result of fouls aren't common; one [study](#) reports only 25% of matches have one. And since club and national teams usually have just one dedicated penalty taker, there just aren't very many players around the world who are used to taking penalty kicks, and even the best ones aren't always successful.

Lionel Messi, perhaps the greatest soccer player of all time, is actually pretty bad at them. He's uniquely able to put the ball wherever he wants during the flow of a game, and even when [taking free kicks](#) further from goal, but when he steps to the penalty spot it doesn't always go his way. He's [missed half the penalties](#) he's taken in his six World Cups. Kylian Mbappé, who is [tied](#) with Messi for the most goals in this tournament, missed the only penalty kick he's taken this World Cup. And these are the best players in the world!

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When these high-stakes moments come, most players have very little experience at it. When 18-year-old [Lucas Herrington](#) walked up to take Australia's fourth penalty kick at the end of the match against Egypt, his kick led to Australia's elimination. Some high-pressure misses are remembered forever, but most fans recognized the courage it took for this kid to be willing to try.

It's impossible to ignore the metaphorical aspect of a moment like this: one player standing alone over the ball, sizing up the goalie; the goalie staring back, anticipating the kick. Most of our lives are lived in community and defined by relationships — within families, schools, workplaces, churches — but some of the most significant moments are the ones we face alone. We are judged and remembered for how we respond.

Studies show we are prone to overestimating our own abilities and [behaviors](#). In one [poll](#), 41% of men under 30 said they "would definitely or probably score a penalty kick in a World Cup match." Hmm. But these penalty kick shootouts are a good reminder that everyone misses sometimes. We need only face the moment with integrity.

The 2022 final between France and Argentina, widely considered one of the greatest World Cup games ever played, was decided by a penalty kick shootout. So if it happens again this year, spare a prayer for the pressure these players are under — and ask yourself how you would respond, whatever the outcome.

This story appears in the **World Cup 2026** feature series. [View the full series](#).